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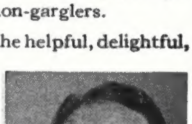

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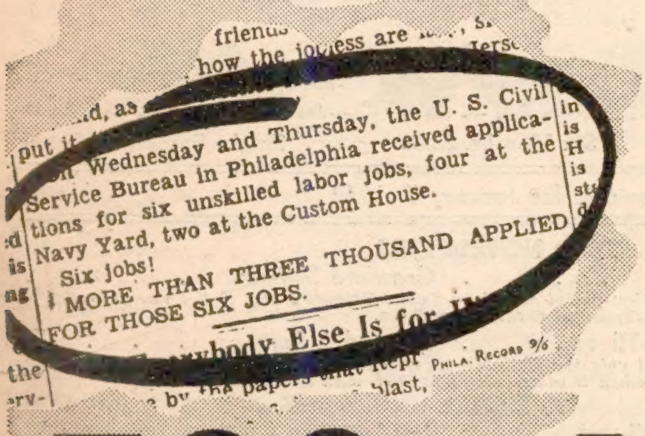

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THE ROUNDUP

"WHEN I went to the Southwest," writes Luke Short, whose outstanding human interest story, TEST PIT, appears on page 39 of this issue, "I found so many story plots waiting to be written that I set about doing my share and, in three years, besides many short stories and novelettes, I have written and had published, ten serials." We think that's a record any spinner of yarns can be proud of and we're mighty glad to say that we've just bought Luke's latest serial which will appear in an early issue of Western Story.

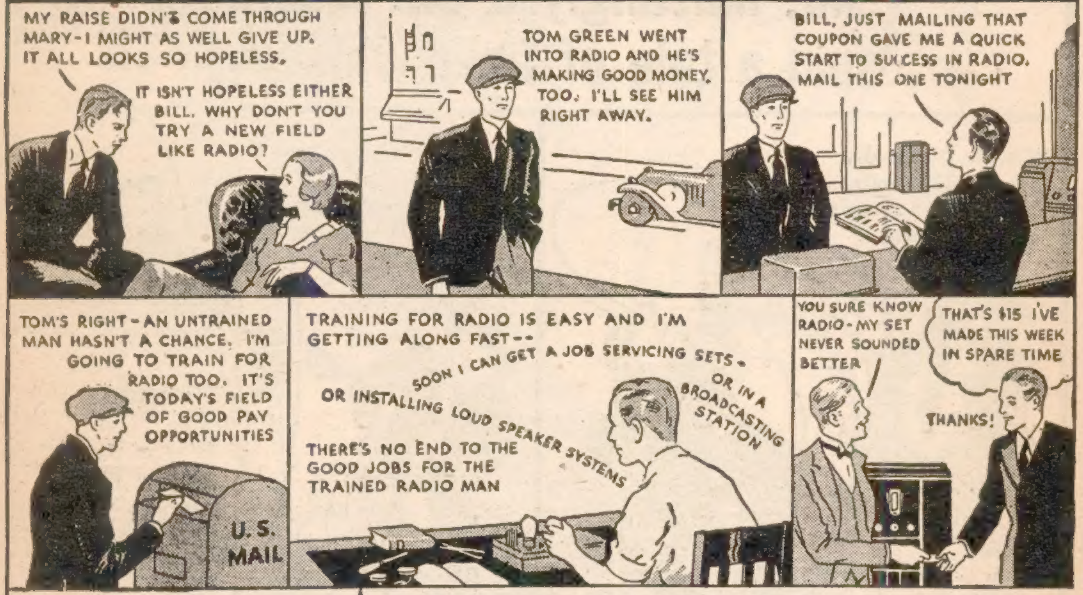
We thought that you'd be interested in knowing what sort of hombre Luke Short is, so we asked him to tell us a bit about himself. Here's what he has to say: "I like to drive dogs, talk to Indians, read anything, live in any snowy country, paddle, pole or track a canoe and travel anywhere, any time, on water. My pet dislikes are towns over ten thousand, heat, shooting animals, apartment houses, new hats and radios. And I have two consuming ambitions—to become as proficient with a Colt .45 as some of the old-time gun fighters and to raise and train a Springer spaniel that will win a field trial." We hope sincerely that Luke realizes both of these ambitions—and we hope, too, that he keeps those fine yarns coming this way.

Mary Hecter Borger, of West Plains, Missouri, hopes that we'll publish more "Potluck Jones" stories by Ney N. Geer. Among other favorite writers, she includes William Colt MacDonald, and expresses the wish that "there will be lots more stories featuring 'The Three Mesquiteers.'" We're glad to announce that plans for the coming year include our old friend Potluck, and the January 21st issue features a long novel by MacDonald.

Coming next week—

Someone was getting mighty careless with a running iron on the Diamond range and when Tom Savage and his three-man army discovered who it was, they did some brand-burning themselves. Walt Coburn is back with another smashing cow-country novel, TRAITOR'S BRAND. A vicious crew of hijacking pirates was ruling the salmon coast with murder guns, and Gary Godwin had to put up a fight against them, alone and unaided. Joseph F. Hook tells you how he did it, in a thrilling short story, TRAP BAIT. Meet SAGEBRUSH MEDICO—sometimes he got plumb tired of being a bullet-extracter, but he never stopped hoping that some day the South River Basin would cease being a battleground. Von Cort has written a heart-warming story of a man whose courage and foresight kept a range from going gun-crazy. Big Steve Ordway's standards for the men he ramrodded were pretty high, but young Billy knew he was cut out to be a cowpuncher if he could just earn a chance to prove himself. L. L. Foreman's latest story, CATTLEMAN'S PASS, is a tale you won't want to miss. Besides this fine lineup there are other stories and features by Jay Lucas, E. C. Lincoln, Charles L. McNichols and Gerard Delano—plus all your departments.

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED—THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!



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DESERT FURY

by CRAWFORD SULLIVAN

CHAPTER I

DESERT DUPLICITY

"Logan, I can't go no farther! Reckon it's the fever—" The dark-faced rider clutched his saddlehorn with both hands and swayed unsteadily. His feet left the stirrups, and he tumbled headfirst down on the powdery desert sand.

Will Logan dismounted and rolled the fallen rider over with his toe.

The man's mouth hung open. His eyes were wide and staring.

"Get up, Traeger," Logan ordered. "You can't be that bad off."

"Water," mumbled Traeger, pawing at Logan with both hands. A pair of handcuffs rattled on his wrists. "I got to have water!" He shuddered like a man with a chill. Fine particles of sand clung to his black, cracked lips.

Logan considered his companion thoughtfully. For five days they had been riding across the great Saline Basin, and each day Topaz Traeger had become weaker, more irrational. Perhaps the ever-present specter of the gallows tree had something to do with it. Logan noticed that Traeger had a habit of feeling his throat at intervals, as though the noose were already tightening around his neck. Or perhaps it was merely thirst, the strain of existing on a bare cup of water a day.

On the second day out of Leedsville Logan's burro had poked its front foot through a weak place in the salt flats, breaking its leg and rupturing the big water bag fastened to its pack. Logan had not turned back. He was in a hurry to get Traeger off his hands as soon as possible.

But now the young marshal began to wonder whether he would ever deliver his prisoner to the State prison. The man seemed to be dying. Logan himself, hardy as he was, felt weakened by that hot desert sun.

Logan lifted the single canteen from his saddle, unscrewed the cap, and poured a little of the tepid fluid into a small tin cup. He was tempted to take a drink himself, but instead he swallowed the hard lump in his throat and hung the canteen on his saddlehorn.

Traeger lay flat on his back, his flat features distorted terribly. "I'm dyin', Logan," he moaned in a dry, raking voice. "Dyin'—"

The lawman believed him. Logan's own rugged strength had taken him through this arid basin many times, and on several occasions he had seen men drop by the wayside, tortured to madness, their vitality sucked up by the scorching sand, rock, and sky.

Kneeling beside the prostrate man, Will Logan placed the tin cup to his lips. Traeger lapped up the water like a cat, his caked, purple tongue dipping into the cup with the quickness of a snake's fang.

"Lift me up," Traeger implored. "Raise my shoulders so's I can drink."

"Take it easy." Logan bolstered the man's shoulders with his left arm and pressed the cup once more to Traeger's mouth.

SUDDENLY Traeger twisted his body, made a swooping motion with his arms, and smashed the heavy handcuffs against Logan's forehead. Logan fell backward. Traeger leaped to his feet and stamped his boot heel viciously on the marshal's face. Hobnails drew blood from Logan's jaw, and a spur sliced his cheek.

With an exultant whoop, Traeger dived for his captor's holster. Logan beat him to it, but as he yanked out the .45, Traeger wrenched his gun arm with both manacled hands and sent the weapon skating across the sand. The handcuffs descended on Logan's forehead a second time, carving a deep gash in his temple.

Feebly Logan tried to climb back to his feet. As he crawled to one knee, Traeger lifted a large black boulder and hurled it at the marshal's head. There was a dead sickening crack. Logan collapsed, a

thick red stream flowing from his scalp.

Traeger rummaged in the marshal's vest until he found a key for the handcuffs. Two rings set with topaz glinted on the outlaw's right hand. The one on his third finger was yellowish, while his ring finger was adorned with a larger stone, colored deep orange.

"I told you they'd never hang me," chuckled Traeger. He heaved the shackles away with a sigh of relief and bent to pick up the gun that had fallen. "Reckon I'm purty clever, eh? I oughta drill you, but instead I'm takin' the water. Which means you'll die a nice lingerin' death. Adios—lawman!"

He buckled on Logan's gun belt, emptied the unconscious marshal's pockets, and fastened his silver badge on his own vest. Taking the canteen and a water bag from Logan's horse, he mounted his pinto and started back toward Leedsville.

But Traeger had no intention of returning to the little mining town where he had been convicted of murder. At the end of the Saline Basin was a trail which extended through the mountains, across the Playa del Fuego and into Mexico.

The canteen and water bag would last both Traeger and his horse for many days. The big man smiled wickedly as he pressed his boot tips against the tapaderas and flicked his quirt. Topaz Traeger had been bred on the desert. He required very little water.

CHAPTER II

THE RESCUERS

A BUZZARD circled high over the Rhyolite Hills and glided toward the still, brown-clad figure which lay sprawled in the sand. Cautiously it swooped down in graceful, whirling banks, eying first the prone man and then the white horse that stood close by.

Old Silas Curry saw the buzzard from a distance. "Somethin' dead up there sure," he remarked to the slender, dark-eyed girl who rode by his side. "When you see buzzards in this country, it means only one thing: A man's been around. There ain't no animal, 'cept maybe a chuckwalla, that could live in this here desert."

The girl shuddered. "You mean," she said fearfully, "that a man is probably lying over there?"

"Man or horse," stated Silas Curry, stroking his whiskered chin. "When you've been prospectin' as long as I have—"

"Let's hurry," interrupted the girl.

"We got plenty of time, Marge," the old man told her. "If it's a man, an' he's dead, there ain't nothin' we can do. If he's alive— Hey! Come back!"

Digging in her spurs, the girl galloped over the soft sand at a foolhardy pace. Silas Curry watched her disappear over the tip of a dune, and tugged at his two pack animals. The buzzard gained altitude and went winging across the valley. A frantic, high-pitched voice broke the silence.

"Grandfather, come here!"

By the time Silas Curry reached the dune's top, the girl had rejoined him.

"The water—give me a canteen quick!" she exclaimed. "It *is* a man and he's still alive!"

"Drat the luck," growled Silas Curry. "I got a feelin' this is gonna mean trouble."

The man lay sprawled in an ungainly position, his face half buried in the sand. Clotted blood matted his tawny hair, and a wide red streak

extended down his lean jaw from temple to chin. He was young, broad-shouldered, with long, muscular limbs and a solid, well-built body. As the girl bathed his temples, he opened his eyes wonderingly.

"I'm Marge Curry," the girl told him, mopping the dried blood from his forehead. "My grandfather and I packed down from Gila. We're headed south."

"My name's Will Logan," the man said hoarsely. "Town marshal at Leedsville."

"How'd you get in this fix?" demanded Silas Curry, climbing from his horse. "Leedsville's a long way off."

"I WAS taking a murderer up north to the State prison," Logan explained. "Hombre by the name of Traeger. He made me believe ha was dyin', then busted me on the conk an' made his getaway."

"Mebbe so, mebbe not," grunted Silas Curry. His sharp glance swept over Logan as the young man got to his feet. "Thirty years of prospectin' has taught me not to believe all I'm told. If you're the town marshal, where's your badge?"

Logan's hand went to his vest. He rummaged through his pockets.

"The dirty coyote," he growled. "Stole everything I had."

"Why didn't he take your horse, too?" demanded Curry, backing to a safe distance. "Wouldn't surprise me none to find that *you're* the murderer."

"Nonsense," the girl spoke up. "He doesn't look like a—"

"Looks don't mean anythin'," said the old man brusquely. "Little Ike Britton, the worst killer in three States, had a face like a baby. You got a lot to learn, Marge."

"I don't care," she retorted stubbornly. "This man's in trouble—and it's up to us to help him."

"Sure," agreed Curry. "We'll help him. We'll take him with us to Leedsville. If he's the town marshal, well an' good. If he ain't—" The miner patted his gun significantly.

"Suits me," said Will Logan.

"We're campin' here for the night," Curry continued. "Logan, you sit there, an' don't move without my permission. My trigger finger's mighty nervous."

Will Logan nodded and seated himself on a rock. He did not consider Curry's attitude strange. The Saline Basin had long been the hideout of outlaws fleeing across the border, and Logan could offer no proof of his identity.

Logan's one desire was to catch up with Topaz Traeger. He half wished he had shot the gunman down on that moonlit night a month back when he caught Traeger sneaking away from the Red Dawn Mine. Instead he had chased him across Eagle Plateau before Traeger at last surrendered. It wasn't until then that Logan spotted an orange topaz on Traeger's right hand. The ring had belonged to Charley Goodman, owner of the Red Dawn.

They dug Goodman's body out of the mine shaft the next day, a single bullet through his head. Traeger was allowed to keep the ring, since Goodman had no relatives and every one considered the stone unlucky.

A soft voice interrupted Logan's thoughts. "Don't mind my grandfather," said Marge Curry hesitantly. "I believe your story—no matter what he says."

"Thanks, miss," replied Logan earnestly.

He watched her unloose the cinches and pull the saddle from her pony's back. Her actions were boy-

ish, yet she had a radiant, feminine charm. From under a dusty, fawn-colored hat curled strands of silken brown hair, its ends turned gold by the sun. The girl's smooth skin was delicately tanned, her smile friendly. A strange pair of traveling companions, this girl and her hard-shelled, weather-beaten old grandfather.

As soon as the sun disappeared, the air turned bitterly cold. Logan wrapped a saddle blanket around his tired body and bedded down beside a long boulder. Silas Curry and the girl slept in the open, near the horses. They were on the trail again before sunup, heading up the vast, desolate basin.

Will Logan rode in the lead as the little caravan made its way through shifting sands and spiked salt formations which glistened with a dull, creamy luster. The young marshal had not said much since his meeting with Silas Curry. He preferred to wait until the old miner's first suspicions had worn off before trying to make conversation. There was plenty of time.

It was high noon when they caught sight of Poison Well. The pool lay sparkling in the center of the valley, like an oblong emerald. Beside the well, Logan saw a stark brown-and-white figure. He recognized it as Topaz Traeger's pinto.

It could mean only one thing—the escaped murderer was close by.

CHAPTER III

A SHOT FROM AMBUSH

LOGAN'S face was tense when he dismounted by Poison Well. "Don't let your animals drink that water," he warned. "It's full of arsenic."

He inspected the dead horse. A broken halter told him the story. The pony had been tied to a needle-shaped rock near the pool and had jerked itself loose to obtain a drink from the enticing water. Logan looked around for footprints, but a morning wind had wiped out all traces of Traeger's whereabouts.

"What's wrong?" asked Marge Curry, pulling up beside him.

"Wait here," Logan said. "Traeger's around some place. I'm goin' after him."

"No, you ain't," snapped Silas Curry, his hand on his gun. "You're stayin' right here. How do I know this Traeger hombre ain't your partner?"

"Let me have your gun," Logan said quietly as he swung into the saddle. "As marshal, it's my duty to bring this killer to justice. Traeger's armed. He'll murder all three of us if we give him a chance."

"I can take care o' him," the old man insisted. "Stand your distance!"

"I need that gun," Logan said earnestly. His keen eyes bored into Silas Curry as he rode forward. Curry leveled the revolver at Logan's chest, thumbed the hammer.

"*Watch out!*"

Marge Curry screamed the words as the whining *spang* of a bullet shattered the desert silence. Logan felt a rush of hot air whiz past his cheek. Then he noticed that Silas Curry's gun was still unfired. Glancing to the left, Logan saw a black hat brim bob up from behind a pile of dark-green boulders. He wheeled his pony and galloped toward the clustered stones, his body bent close to the animal's mane.

Racing into the blaze of gunfire, Logan swiveled from the saddle and leaped toward the low-lying rocks. As he threw himself forward, a gaping gun muzzle angled into his face. Logan bent low and dived at the gunman. Spurting flame burned his nostrils and a deafening explosion

battered his eardrums. Logan's shoulder smacked into a tough, muscular body, and both men went rolling. With a quick grasp, Logan pinned down his enemy's gun arm and flashed an uppercut to the killer's jaw.

"I've got you this time, Traeger," he panted, wrenching the man's arm backward until the outlaw loosened his grip on the gun. "I figured you'd be lyin' in wait for me some place near."

"If my horse hadn't drank that water, I'd be halfway to the border," mumbled Traeger, crawling to his feet.

The gun was in Will Logan's hand now. Traeger eyed it darkly. Rivers of sweat poured over his black-stubbled chin. Strands of coarse, sopping hair curled around his dirty collar. There was fear in the outlaw's eyes—the same torturing fear of the hangnoose that had haunted him for the past month.

Will Logan trained the gun on Traeger's forehead. He was tempted to jerk the trigger. It would save trouble. Taking the outlaw back to Leedsville would only prolong his misery. Weeks would pass before Traeger finally climbed those thirteen steps to the gallows.

Traeger knew what Logan was thinking. "Logan, don't shoot," he whimpered. His face twitched with spasms of fear. His lips quivered nervously.

LOGAN'S eyes were like steel gimlets. No, he could not kill Traeger in cold blood. He had sworn to uphold the law, and it was the law's command that the murderer be executed after due process of law. Come what may, Logan could not betray his trust.

Silas Curry rode up behind Logan at that moment.

"Put 'em up," the old man rasped. "You're covered. Now throw that gun away 'fore I drill you."

"Don't interfere with the law," said Logan, without turning his head. "This man's a murderer."

"Then why is he wearin' a badge?" retorted Curry, looking at the silver star on Traeger's vest.

The young marshal's temper was worn thin. "You fool," he said impatiently. "I told you he stole it from me."

"Don't believe him, mister!" exclaimed Traeger. A plan had suddenly popped into his furtive mind. "*I'm* the marshal at Leedsville. Logan's wanted there for murder. I can prove it—"

"Maybe so," the old man interrupted. "But both of you look like bad hombres to me. I'm takin' no chances."

"Logan escaped from me yesterday," continued Traeger. "We had a fight, I left him for dead. I shot at him just now when I saw he was tryin' to lay hands on your gun."

"You dirty skunk!" flared Logan. "I ought to drill you right between the eyes."

"Drop the gun," repeated Silas Cury. His voice was as harsh as the rasp of a file.

"Not for a million pesos," Logan rapped back. He turned to face the miner.

Curry's .45 belched fire, and the slug hit Logan in the arm, knocking him to the ground. When Logan gathered his whirling senses, he was lying face down. A red stain was spreading down his sleeve.

As the old man aimed his gun again, Marge Curry reined up beside him and grabbed at his arm.

"Wait!" she begged. "Give him a chance to explain—"

"I ain't gonna kill him," rumbled Silas Curry. "Just wanted to call

his bluff. He didn't figger I would."

Logan got up, holding his wounded arm.

"The party's yours," he said disgustedly. "I did my best to warn you."

"Pick up his gun, Marge," ordered Curry. "I'm the only one in this crowd who's going to carry firearms."

Obediently Marge Curry recovered the gun, which had dropped from Logan's hand. Topaz Traeger watched her with glittering eyes.

"I'm much obliged to you folks," he said. "If you hadn't stepped in, Logan would have drilled me sure."

"It might have been for the best," Silas Curry said gruffly. "Your looks don't please me none. Besides, I didn't plug Logan to protect you. I'm thinkin' only of ourselves. We've got to reach Leedsville, an' we ain't trustin' strangers. Understand?"

"But you're not gonna leave me here?" Traeger asked him.

"No," said the old man. "Both of you hombres say you're the town marshal. So I'm takin' you both to Leedsville. Reckon the townspeople will know which is which."

THE caravan rode away from Poison Well, leaving a bundle of clothing and blankets beside the carcass of Traeger's horse. This enabled Traeger to ride one of the pack animals which trailed behind Marge Curry. Old Silas was taking no chances. He followed in the rear, keeping an alert eye on the two men ahead. A carbine rested in a sheath on his saddle, and a pearl-handled .45 hung low at his hip. Logan's revolver had been placed in a leather saddlebag.

Logan and Marge Curry rode side by side. They were both ill at ease as a result of Silas Curry's obvious distrust. But after an hour's steady riding, the girl broke the silence.

"Does your arm hurt much?" she inquired timidly. "I'm afraid I'm not very good at bandaging."

"It's just a flesh wound," answered Logan, keeping his eyes fastened on the horizon. Waves of dry heat shimmered along the expanse before him, so that the distant hills seemed to shake like huge lumps of blue jelly.

"I . . . I'm sorry my grandfather shot you," she said earnestly. "He's so headstrong."

"See here," said Will Logan abruptly. "What are you doin' on this desert, anyway? Reckon I've got a right to ask."

"Of course," the girl agreed. "We're going to meet my father in Leedsville. He's been prosperous around here for some time. I haven't seen him for ten years."

"Your father?" Logan mopped the sweat from his bronzed face with his shirt sleeve. "I know most of the miners around these parts, but I can't recall any one by the name of Curry."

"He doesn't use that name," she replied. "There was a bank scandal in Phoenix ten years ago. My father was convicted of misappropriating funds. He escaped from prison—"

"Don't tell me too much," warned Logan. "I'm the town marshal of Leedsville, even though Traeger is wearing my badge."

"It doesn't make any difference now," she explained. "The real criminal confessed last June. That's why we've come to tell dad he can return. No one knows the name he's using now, so we couldn't send him a message. I hope we'll find him."

"I'll help you all I can when we get to Leedsville," promised Logan,

"But I'm afraid there'll be fireworks before long. Traeger's bound to make a break the first chance he gets."

"I'm not worried," said the girl. "Grandfather is suspicious and stubborn, but he's a crack shot. Today he shot the wrong man. Next time, it'll be different."

"Then you do trust me?" he asked.

"Run for it!" Curry roared. "The whole cliff's comin' down!"

"I told you that when we first met," she answered simply. Her soft hand reached out and pressed Logan's lightly—and Will Logan felt the cool imprint of her fingers all that afternoon.

CHAPTER IV

THE DELUGE

THE rest of the day proved uneventful, as did the three days following. They were searing, sweltering days, which began with a burst of red glory and ended as though the sun had suddenly been yanked behind the hills by invisible wires. Each night was the same: crystal clear and bitingly cold.

Silas Curry slept like a cat, his rifle by his side, the pearl-handled Colt always within reach of his fingertips. The girl took her place beside him. Logan and Traeger slept as far apart as possible, both within Curry's immediate range.

As they journeyed southward, the Saline Basin became narrower, more volcanic. The Rhyolite Hills flanked it on one side with high, black bluffs. On the eastern edge, No Gold Mountain hunched in like a great sparkling dragon, forming a barrier between Saline Basin and the Playa del Fuego.

It was on the fourth day that trouble began.

Two things caused it: a woman and a cloud.

Will Logan was observing both. He had watched Marge Curry struggle uncomplainingly across the choking sand and alkali-coated flats until it seemed as if she could go no farther. Water rations were low, with barely enough for the horses; but the girl refused to take more than her alloted share, even when her grandfather offered it to her. Logan noticed that she had become weaker, that her eyes had lost their luster.

Then there was the cloud—a huge black mushroom-shaped cloud. It had floated in from the east, skimming across the intense blue sky and settling lower and lower as it approached the towering Rhyolite Hills.

As the procession made its way up the valley, Logan swung his pony around and pointed at the sky.

"We'd better head for those hills," he told Silas Curry. "The quicker the better. I'd hate to get caught here in a cloudburst."

"Reckon you're right," said Curry. "See any safe places?"

Logan nodded and turned his horse toward a deep crevice in the nearby hills where the solid stone appeared to have been hacked out by a giant ax.

Topaz Traeger blinked at the cloud, darted a glance back at Curry, and moistened his cracked lips. Each passing day had made the outlaw more nervous, more watchful. Leedsville was not far distant; and as yet the outlaw had found no opportunity to lay hands on a gun. Silas Curry was too shrewd and suspicious. But Traeger felt that soon his chance would come. Perhaps this was the day.

The great cloud shoved itself in front of the sun, but instead of relieving the heat, it made the valley suffocating. A funereal pall of gloom, bleak desolation, and stuffy, heat-laden air hung over the peaked Rhyolite Hills.

Nearing the ragged igneous hills, Logan felt the sweat suddenly pour down his face. With the drying sun gone, his clothes turned clammy. He looked at Marge. She was weaving slightly in the saddle, her chin set bravely. Then, without uttering a

sound, she crumpled forward and tumbled to the ground.

"Marge!" The shout sprang from Silas Curry's throat. He spurred his horse ahead and fairly fell from the saddle as he reached the huddled form.

Will Logan was holding the girl in his arms. "I knew it was coming," he said. "The strain's been too much for her."

Silas Curry was frantic with fear. "Look at me, Marge," he pleaded. "It's me, your granddad. Logan, fetch her some water!"

LOGAN rose to his feet and saw Traeger sprinting toward Silas Curry's horse, which had stopped a short distance away. With a sudden chill, he remembered that Curry's rifle was resting in the saddleboot. Logan made a dash for him.

Traeger gripped the saddle and slid the carbine from its case, his face twisted with rage. Hastily he slipped the weapon to his shoulder and fired. The bullet whizzed low, kicking up a small geyser of sand near Logan's boots.

Before the shot had stopped reverberating, Logan reached the gunman and plunged head down for Traeger's midriff. Traeger lifted the rifle high and whacked the stock on Logan's backbone. As if he did not even feel the blow, the marshal hurled the outlaw to the earth.

Logan's fists smashed into the other's face like bombshells. Traeger lashed back viciously, struggling to roll from under Logan's pinning knees. Bending agilely at the waist, Traeger pressed his back to the ground, flipped up both feet, and locked his heels around the marshal's neck. His sharp spurs raked Logan's cheek as he exerted all the strength his stocky legs possessed and pulled Logan backward. Blood streamed from the marshal's face as he fell over into the sand. Traeger scrambled up, grabbing the fallen rifle as he arose.

Down came the rifle stock again, whacking the side of Logan's head with a sharp, bone-cracking impact. Logan wabbled to his feet, trying to gather his dazed senses. Traeger pumped the rifle lever and brought the gun to his shoulder. But as he pressed the trigger, Logan lunged at him, thrusting the barrel skyward. The shot whined into the lowering black cloud.

It seemed as though Traeger's bullet had actually punctured the cloud, for at that moment drenching rain poured down on the parched valley.

Logan slammed his fist hard into Traeger's face, and the outlaw staggered. Traeger fought like a wild cat to keep possession of the rifle, but with Logan gripping the barrel, the weapon was useless. Loosing his hold on the gunstock, Traeger lashed a right to Logan's jaw and followed it with a vicious left that clipped the marshal's ear.

Flinging the carbine aside, Will Logan waded in with both fists. This was what he had been waiting for—a chance to smash Traeger into the earth, to knock the outlaw loose from his hinges, and to batter that dark, leering face into insensibility.

A grim smile passed over Logan's lacerated features. Traeger's tremendous strength and animal cunning would not save him this time. Logan bored in relentlessly, whipping swift, hard punches at his enemy's crimsoning face. Traeger's eyes were wide. His breath came in short, choking gasps.

Meanwhile, the rain continued to fall in great hot drops. It slopped from the sky in torrents, turning the

sand to gray mush, streaming off the pitchy hills in a thousand brimming cataracts. The bare Saline Basin was no longer a desert. It had become a gloomy quagmire, echoing wth the hiss and rumble of water foaming over sun-baked rock.

As old Silas Curry bent over the limp form of his granddaughter, he paid scant attention to the sliding, grappling men who struggled not fifteen feet away. His only thoughts were of the girl he had raised from childhood. Silas Curry knew the peril of a desert cloudburst. Those hills to the west offered the one sure refuge.

The old miner lifted the girl from the ground and placed her over his shoulder. Doggedly he trudged through the blinding downpour, his boots sinking deep into the wet sand. The horses had wandered away, and there was no time to look for them. Puffing under his burden, Silas Curry plodded on toward the hills.

Two sand-smeared figures wallowed on the soggy valley floor. It was impossible to tell which was which, for only a welter of hammering fists and twisting bodies remained visible. The whole valley was now dotted with ever-widening pools. The ominous black cloud settled lower, expending all its fury.

From the sky there dropped a blanket of rain so thick that Will Logan was hardly able to see his adversary. The water rushed into his eyes as if dashed from a pail. Traeger wailed a shrill warning.

"We got to run for it!" he gasped. "We'll both be done for!"

"You yellow rat," growled Logan. He dug his thumbs into the murderer's throat and shook Traeger until his eyes bulged. "Drowning's a lot better'n you deserve!"

Traeger wrenched himself free, siddled through the mire with a snakelike wriggle, and kicked Logan in the stomach. Like a wounded coyote, the killer limped toward the hills.

Shielding his face from the rain, Traeger spotted Silas Curry's horse standing a short distance ahead. The outlaw sloshed forward and, summoning all his strength, pulled himself across the saddle. A snap of the quirt, and Topaz Traeger galloped up the valley, vanishing almost instantly from Logan's sight.

With a roaring rumble the water came tumbling through the bottlenecked valley—a mighty torrent unleashed from the ribbed mountainsides. Logan heard it coming and looked about vainly for Marge Curry and her grandfather. Discovering the four remaining horses grouped in a frightened huddle, he mounted his own pony. Stringing the animals together hastily, he started for the hills.

Before he had gotten halfway, the first surge of water struck. It swirled about the horses' legs, threatening to drag the beasts down in a whirling eddy. A wall of black rock loomed up ahead, and Logan discerned the narrow crevice which he had been trying to reach before the cloudburst. He prodded in his spurs, and the animals splashed onward, straining against the current.

As he expected, the crevice sloped up from the valley basin, and its floor of honeycombed lava offered a foothold for the horses. Emerging from the torrent, Logan made his way up the cut, thirty or more feet above the rising flood. Thoroughly exhausted, he dropped to the rocky floor.

"Will—"

The voice seemed very far away, but when Logan looked up, he saw Marge Curry crouched beside him.

Old Silas Curry was inspecting the horses.

"I'm glad you're safe, Will," the girl murmured in his ear. "It was my fault. I shouldn't have fainted."

"Reckon you're a square-shooter," Silas Curry broke in gruffly. "Traeger was the bad one. I would have helped you with him, but I had Marge on my hands—an' anyway, I couldn't shoot for fear of hittin' you."

"Traeger got away," Logan told him. "He took your horse."

"He won't get very far," Silas Curry remarked dryly. "That water'll wash him clear to Utah."

"It looks as though he was right about one thing," said Will Logan. "He told me three weeks ago that he'd never be hanged."

The rain cloud was drifting into small pieces, which scattered away like a hundred furry gray rabbits. Once again the moon came out clear and cold, and the three huddled together in the narrow cut in an effort to rest their tired bodies. The girl slept with her head resting against Will Logan's shoulder. Once the young man pressed his lips to her forehead, then took them away quickly.

There was enchantment on the desert that night. Will Logan felt its spell for the first time. The world had turned topsy-turvy, and the parched Saline Basin was for one night a raging river.

CHAPTER V

AVALANCHE OF DEATH

By morning the water had disappeared entirely. Clouds of steam arose from the rocks and ascended in great sheets from the valley floor. Will Logan was heartened as he cinched up the saddles and threw a diamond hitch over the pack animal. If all went well, they should be in Leedsville before nightfall.

"How do you think I ought to go about finding my father?" Marge Curry asked him, as they progressed up the steaming basin. "I don't know what name to ask for, and I haven't any idea where he lives."

"Leedsville's a small place," Logan told her. "If you want, I'll arrest the whole town, line 'em up together, an' let you take your pick."

"We'll find him all right," stated Silas Curry. "If he's anything like his old man, he'll own the richest mine in the country. Charley an' me used to prospect all over Arizona when he was a kid."

"Charley?" said Will Logan questioningly. "Is that your son's name?"

Silas Curry bobbed his gray head. "It used to be his name. I heard he changed it."

Logan said nothing, but there was a thoughtful, worried look in his eyes.

Gradually the Saline Basin dwindled into a deep gorge, crenelated on the topmost rim and flanked by shelves of red and green rock. Both canyon sides resembled huge fortresses, with ramparts, parapets, and jutting bastions. Here and there, massive chunks of lava pointed wind-worn spires skyward. In places the rain had sent large boulders rolling into the chasm. Loose stone still clattered down at intervals, menacing the riders. After rounding a bend, Logan drew his pony to a halt.

"Look at this," he said, pointing to hoofprints in the rocky soil. "There's a chance Topaz Traeger didn't take that trip to Utah, after all."

"Yeah," admitted Silas Curry, bending from the saddle. "But maybe those ain't his prints."

"They were made since the rain," Logan pointed out. "The sun's dried 'em out completely. Which means the rider came through here at least two hours ago."

"I'd like to get a crack at him," Silas Curry growled. "If I hadn't been so thickheaded, this'd never have happened. By the way, there was a shootin' iron in that saddle-bag on the horse he stole."

"A good one, too," Logan returned dryly. "It used to belong to me."

He glanced up at a red, spherical rock that was perched on a shelf about fifty feet above. It was a queerly shaped formation: smooth, round, set on top of a pyramid of blue-green boulders as if placed there by human hands. He was about to point it out to Marge Curry, when he saw the rock move. It tilted slightly to one side, then leaned forward precariously. Logan wondered if he were seeing things. The rock could not possibly move of its own accord. He shielded his eyes from the sunlight and, watching closely, saw a black spidery form shoving at it on one side. Topaz Traeger!

Logan whacked the girl's pony with his quirt.

"Ride!" he shouted. "Get going!"

Marge Curry stared at him, open-mouthed, and clung to the reins as her pony galloped up the canyon. Pulling the pack animal after him, Logan raced behind her. A shower of small stones pelted them.

Silas Curry yelled a warning, but his shout was drowned out by a rumble from above. Logan twisted in the saddle and saw a falling boulder hit the old man in the back and pitch him to the ground. Curry's horse stumbled and plumped down on the prone rider. The animal tried to rise, but its foreleg was broken by the fall. Logan wheeled his pony and hastened to the old man's aid.

"Get back!" screeched the old man. "Save yourself!"

HIS lips set in a tight line, Logan slid over the cantle and tugged at the bridle of Curry's thrashing horse. Sharp-pointed rock splinters thwacked his skull. The clattering avalanche became louder; the hail of stones thicker. Like an enormous ball, the globular rock bumped slowly down the cliff-side, dislodging smaller stones as it rolled to the edge of the broad shelf.

Logan pulled the injured beast off Curry's body and jerked the old man to his feet.

"Run for it!" he ordered.

Curry's bowed legs worked like shuttles as he scooted up the canyon. Madge Curry screamed. The huge rock hurtled over the shelf like a descending meteor, raking the opposite wall of the canyon and bouncing back crazily. It landed with a splitting crash that made the whole mountainside tremble. Then, in a sweep of glistening green, the dislodged mass of shale and jagged stone sloughed into the gorge, raising a dry, clattering tumult. Clouds of colored rock dust puffed upward as the tons of stone rattled over the sloping shelf.

Marge Curry stood biting blood from her hand, watching with frozen horror as the billowing dust rolled over her and scattering stones dropped at her feet. As the canyon cleared, she saw her grandfather lying a short distance away, his body almost covered by loose rock. Silas Curry's grizzled face was tight with pain, and a crimson slit furrowed his forehead from scalp to eyebrows. He was groaning helplessly.

The girl dropped to her knees, clawing away the rock. Her eyes tried to penetrate the clearing dust for some sign of Will Logan. Noth-

ing but somber green malachite was visible, except for a horse's foreleg which stuck stiffly out of the stony pile.

Marge Curry's mouth trembled helplessly. During the past few days the girl had found a friendship greater than she had ever known before. It was more than a friendship, she realized suddenly. And now Will Logan had gone out of her life as abruptly as he had entered it.

"He did his best to save me," Silas Curry groaned. "I wasn't worth it —not after the way I treated him—" His words trailed off to a pained mumble.

Down the canyon side came a bulky black figure, clambering from the high shelf like a four-legged spider. Using hands and feet dexterously, Topaz Traeger lowered himself from one rampart to the next, finding safe footholds in the cliff's jagged wall. Neither Marge Curry nor her grandfather saw him as he dropped to the ground behind them.

"Get up," Traeger ordered sharply, "an' reach high, both of you!"

The girl pivoted. Silas Curry struggled to one knee and glared into the muzzle of Traeger's gun. The old man said nothing. His eyes were riveted on an orange stone that gleamed from the outlaw's gun hand.

"Thought you'd gotten rid of me, didn't you?" jeered Traeger. "There was a little canyon farther up the valley that Logan didn't see. It kept me from gettin' drowned—"

"That ring!" croaked Silas Curry. "Where'd you find it?"

TOPAZ TRAEGER laughed grimly. "I figgered you might notice that, so I kept it hid in my pocket. It belonged to a friend of mine—Charley Curry. Only in these parts he was known as Charley Goodman. I managed to find out his right name."

"I gave Charley that ring," said the old man hoarsely. "It's an heirloom. He'd have died before handin' it over to anyone else."

"That's about what happened." Traeger sneered. "But I wanted his gold, not the ring. When I seen it on his finger, I couldn't resist takin' it. I got a fondness for topaz."

"You . . . you killed my father?" gasped the girl.

"He was stubborn—just like the old man." Traeger grinned. "Wouldn't hand over the gold, so I took it anyhow. Only that meddlin' marshal came along as I was makin' my getway. The gold's safe, though. I'll take you with me when I go back after it!"

Marge Curry took a step forward and her open palm met his cheek in a stinging blow. Traeger's face turned a deep brick-red as he shoved the girl aside. He was watching Silas Curry. The old man had painfully pulled himself to his feet. Suddenly he darted one hand to his holster.

Traeger's trigger finger jerked. A burst of fire ripped from the gun muzzle. Silas Curry buckled forward, clutching at his stomach

Traeger holstered his gun and grabbed Marge Curry by the wrist as she sank down by the old man's body.

Sobbing with grief, the girl thumped one small fist into Traeger's face and dug her boot tips into his shins. The outlaw's hold on the girl tightened and he dragged her toward the pack horse. Quickly he unwound the rope which Logan had tied around the animal. When the rope was clear, he built a noose in one end and looped it around the girl's waist.

"Just to make sure you don't get away," he said. "Now git on that horse an' come with me. My pony's tied around the next bend."

When the terrified girl made no move to obey him, he threw her roughly into the saddle.

"Guess that avalanche was a cute trick, huh?" he chuckled.

CHAPTER VI

ROPE'S END

WILL LOGAN was buried alive. The round red rock which Traeger pushed from the cliff had split cleanly in half when it hit the ground, and one half was lodged obliquely against the canyon wall. It was under the niche formed by this rock that Will Logan dived for refuge. The deluge of stone a second later buried the rock completely.

Uninjured, Logan crouched in his stifling prison and tried to dig his way out. It seemed a hopeless task, since there was little room in which to work. And whenever he dislodged one stone, another shifted into its place. The air became heavy, suffocating. With torn fingers he burrowed upward, until he was almost able to stand upright.

The cracking report of a gun told him that he was near the surface. Toiling feverishly, he saw sunlight seep through the rocky chinks, and in a few moments he climbed out into the open. Marge Curry was nowhere in sight, and her grandfather lay face down in a pool of caking blood.

Logan turned the old man over, lifted his head. Silas Curry was still alive, but his strength was ebbing fast.

"What happened to Marge?" demanded Logan. "Where did she—"

Silas Curry opened his eyes. "Traeger said something . . . about getting Charley's gold," he gasped. "He . . . he murdered my son. Now he's got Marge."

"I'll find her," Logan promised grimly.

"You an' me should have met sooner," said the old prospector with a faint smile. "Too bad I was so bullheaded. You're a good lad. You'll take care o' Marge—better'n I could have done."

"I'll do my best," Logan told him.

Silas Curry grasped Logan's hand, then his grip loosened. A ghastly rattle shook the old man's frame, and his chin sagged.

Logan picked up the pearl-handled .45 and fastened on the dead man's gun belt. There was one horse left standing patiently in the shadow of the canyon. Hastily Logan mounted the horse and galloped up the canyon.

Soon he came to a fork. One branch went east to Leedsville, and the other extended straight through the hills in a southerly direction. Traeger's tracks showed that he had taken the eastern trail. That meant that the outlaw was going up over the hills, not to Leedsville, but toward the Red Dawn Mine.

It also explained why the outlaw had been so eager to kill Logan. With the lawman out of the way, Traeger felt free to return for the gold he had cached near Charley Curry's mine.

Determinedly Will Logan pushed his winded horse up the ascending trail, up past Domino Bluff and finally to Eagle Plateau, that high rolling table-land which overlooks the Playa del Fuego.

Following the sheer edge of the plateau, he made for the Red Dawn Mine. As he reached the top of a gentle rise, he saw Traeger.

THE outlaw was standing by the cliff's edge, his back turned to Logan. Sweat poured from Traeger's face as he pulled at a rope which hung over the bluff. One end of the rope was fastened to a scrubby pine. The other end was attached to something heavy.

Logan dropped to the ground and led his horse down the knoll where it would be out of sight. He knew instantly what was swinging in midair on Traeger's rope. Keeping on the other side of the hillock, Logan peered over the towering precipice. Thirty feet below was a slender ledge, an abandoned aerie, dotted with the bones of tiny animals. And dangling above the ledge, the rope looped under her shoulders, was Marge Curry. Two leather pouches were clutched in the girl's hands.

Scarcely breathing, Will Logan watched the girl ascend. Traeger's corded muscles bunched as he hauled her upward, finally dragging her over the cliff's side. His piggy eyes flashing, he snatched the leather pouches from her hands.

"It's all here," he gloated, patting the sacks. "I tossed these over the side when that fool Logan was after me. Clever, eh?"

The girl did not answer. She lay on the ground, face buried in her arms, her shoulders trembling.

"Quit that blubberin'," Traeger snarled. "I'm givin' you your choice right now. Either act sensible an' come to Mexico with me—or go back down on that ledge an' take your chances with the eagles!"

Logan, meanwhile, was creeping to the top of the knoll. He stood up and sighted his gun carefully. It was a long, difficult shot. Steadily, but trembling inwardly, he squeezed the trigger.

The bullet struck Traeger in the shoulder, spinning him to the earth. In a flash the outlaw was up again, his six-gun roaring. Logan dashed forward, zigzagging across the flat land. Another shot at that distance would have been too risky because of Marge.

A screaming slug seared Logan's arm, another whizzed past his ear, but the marshal continued to advance. Blood streaming from his shattered shoulder, Traeger ripped out six bullets, then jerked Marge Curry in front of him as a shield. The girl clawed his face like a wild cat. Traeger dropped his empty gun and gripped her throat savagely.

"Stand back!" he bellowed at Logan. "I'll heave her over the side if you come any farther."

The threat came too late. Before he finished the sentence, Logan was upon him. Traeger gave the girl a powerful shove, hurling her at the cliff's rim. She fell perilously close to the drop, but caught herself in time and scrambled quickly away from the edge. With unrestrained fury, Traeger lunged for Logan's gun arm. Logan's .45 exploded close to Traeger's face, and the bullet screeched out over the playa.

Traeger stumbled to his knees, seized Logan's wrist with both hands, and sank his big teeth deep into the flesh. A stab of agony numbed Will Logan's forearm. Hammering with his left fist, the young man jabbed short thudding punches at Traeger's face. Blow after blow descended on the outlaw's head, but Traeger only buried his teeth deeper. In desperation, Logan drove his knee into Traeger's chest, tried to pry the man's jaws apart with his fingers.

Marge Curry slipped the rope from her shoulders and stumbled to Logan's assistance. Quickly she dropped the running noose over

Traeger's head and pulled at it with all her strength. Traeger's eyes bulged. His mouth gaped open as he gasped for air. Logan freed his torn wrist, but his hand was limp, paralyzed with pain. The Colt slid from his fingers, but before Traeger could pounce upon it, Logan kicked it over the cliff.

Traeger's purpled face was contorted horribly. Leaping to his feet, the outlaw charged at Marge Curry and gave the girl a smashing blow with the back of his hand. She crumpled to the ground, and Traeger fumbled at the rope which was constricting his throat.

WILL LOGAN went suddenly berserk. Boiling hate seethed up inside him like molten lava. His body felt like a hard shell filled with raging fire. There was no reasoning—only blind consuming anger.

Rushing at Traeger, he crashed a left to the outlaw's flat jaw. The outlaw staggered toward the cliff. Then catching himself, he belted Logan in the stomach. Logan's pain-seared arm whacked Traeger's skull like a bludgeon. A left uppercut sent the outlaw stretching to his toes. The marshal's fist shot forward, slashing, probing, beating out Topaz Traeger's endurance with the relentless force of a battering-ram.

Traeger tried to escape, but Logan rammed him back ferociously. The outlaw clutched at the rope around his neck, endeavoring to free himself. The moment Traeger's guard was down. Will Logan drove into his face with a left hook.

"Logan . . . I'm licked . . . I can't stand no more—" Traeger's eyes were swollen and shut. He jabbered with the fear born of cowardice. "Logan—"

Logan saw his lips moving, but his blurred senses could not grasp the words. Flailing, smashing, he sent Traeger sprawling. Traeger's feet went over his head in a backward somersault. Cursing hoarsely, the murderer scuttled from the ground and ran wildly.

The long rope hissed over the cliff's rim as Topaz Traeger stepped blindly into space. An eerie, wailing shriek trembled along the pillared butte, then ceased abruptly. Traeger's body thudded against the narrow ledge and caromed downward. The rope tightened suddenly, a dwarfed pine shuddered.

Will Logan knelt by the precipice and stared at the grotesque figure swinging at the rope's end.

"An' he said he'd never be hung," murmured Logan. "Looks like he saved the state a heap of trouble by doin' it himself."

THEY reached Leedsville that night, Logan and Marge Curry, both half dead from strain and exhaustion. Rance Bluelog, who was both doctor and parson, took care of them for three days —and then married them.

Will Logan resigned as town marshal and took over the Red Dawn Mine. It was he who put Leedsville on the map by uncovering the richest lode in three counties.

Often, when the sun is high, Will and Marge Logan ride to the top of Eagle Plateau, where two white crosses mark the graves of old Silas Cury and his son. It is an old story by now to the miners, how the town marshal started across Saline Basin with a murderer and returned with a bride. But few of them know just why Will Logan wears a sparkling orange topaz on the third finger of his right hand.

THE END.

The Story of the West

Told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

GEORGE DROUILLARD was among the first of the many bold spirits who contributed their share to the early winning of the West. He was the son of Pierre Drouillard and an Indian woman. He had spent most of his life in the woods and was already steeped in the wiles of the wilderness at the time he joined the Lewis and Clark Expedition at St. Louis. He was of inestimable value to the Expedition and acted as interpreter, scout and chief hunter. He it was who read the signs of the forests and plains for the party, explained the signs and customs of the Indians and frequently scouted ahead "feeling the ground with his fingers" for footprints no longer visible. On such missions he wore a red scarf knotted about his head, as a sign of kinship with the redskins. He knew the habits of the animals and when meat was needed it was Drouillard who knew on which side of a ridge the elk or bear were to be found, and who successfully tracked it down and stalked it to the point where with an aim which was described as phenomenally accurate, he brought it down.

After the disbanding of the Expedition Drouillard became associated with Manuel Lisa in the early fur trade and so became one of the leaders in the new movement which was to make St. Louis the center of the West's first great industry and the busiest of river forts. Equally at home on foot, horseback or on the river in a canoe, Drouillard was described by Lisa as "A worthy mate."

When Lisa founded the Missouri Fur Company at St. Louis in 1809, Drouillard was still with him. His activities took him up and down the river between St. Louis and their main post or "fort" on the Yellowstone. Here he often spent the winter. Frequently too he headed expeditions inland from the river and established contacts with the Indians further afield in order to obtain the rich stores of beaver and other pelts gathered by the redskins.

When Antoine Bissonette, one of Lisa's "engagés," or traders, deserted his post (probably absconding with the store of furs he had collected) Lisa ordered Drouillard to go after him and bring him back "dead or alive." For weeks Drouillard followed the faint trail left by the Frenchman. Here a footprint in the mud, there a broken branch or the blackened circle of a small campfire.

At last Drouillard heard ahead of him the snapping of twigs as Bissonette pushed his way through the bushes. Silently Drouillard followed until a clearing offered a good view of his man. The fugitive refused to surrender and threw up his rifle. Drouillard took quick aim and shot him. Bissonette died while being sent down the river to St. Louis. Drouillard was later tried for murder in that city but was acquitted.

Early in May of 1810 Drouillard was out on a trading expedition in company with several Delaware Indians who were also in the employ of the Missouri Fur Co. They had seen signs of the dreaded Blackfeet and knew they were on dangerous ground, but Drouillard was confident he could avoid the enemy. They were mounted and riding single file down a steep-sided gully when without warning an arrow struck the leading Delaware. As he fell from his horse, the dread war cry of the Blackfeet sounded. Drouillard and the others dismounted and, using their mounts as bulwarks, they defended themselves as best they could, firing quickly whenever a painted body was exposed to view as the Blackfeet drew in on them. One by one, the Delawares fell till only Drouillard was left standing. A few minutes later an arrow sped into his throat, ending the life of one of the most valiant of the early frontiersmen.

NEXT WEEK: A RACE WITH DEATH

At last a clearing afforded Drouillard a good view of the fugitive. He ordered him to surrender, but Bissonette refused and raised his rifle. Drouillard took quick aim and fired!

Cowboy Resolvin'

By S. OMAR BARKER

THE snow 'most hid the bunkhouse, but the smoke was risin' straight,
For 'round the cherry-bellied stove the hands was settin' late,
A-waitin' for the feeble year to give its tail a twitch
An' pass into etarnity. So while they scratched their itch,
They got to resolutin' on the ways they aimed to change
As soon as this here New Year taken charge upon the range.
Chuck made the resolution, like a sober feller ort,
To limit one day's drinkin' to a full an' legal quart.
Bill said he'd skun his knuckles on the cook for sorry grub,
But now resolved to quit it—after this he'd use a club.
Ol' Butch, he swore off swearin'—much, an' Pop, at sixty-four,
Allowed he'd do his dangdest not to kiss the gals no more.
Nowatta Sam, he spoke up next an' said he'd set his mind
To lay off brandin' mavericks—except what he could find.
The one they called the Gravel Kid was always gittin' throwed;
He'd never learn to ride a bronc, as ever'body knowed.
So him, he thought he'd resolute that, takin' all in all,
He'd spend this precious New Year jest a-learnin' how to fall.
"Well, I've resolved," said Earnest Ike, "to keep my shirt-tail in!"
He looked around the company, but met with nary grin.
'Twas like a buzzard's shadder had come swoopin' overhead,
To search a gruesome desert for the bodies of the dead.
They set in solemn silence with the old year slippin' by,
Until at last Nowatta Sam, he hove a hefty sigh:
"I guess Ike ain't the cowboy breed, to speak so bold an' brash,
An' make a resolution that's so sinful an' so rash!
Us cowboys looks at things that is, an' sees 'em as they are.
We never waste no loops upon a fur-off shootin' star.
An' New Year's good resolvin' . . . well, we study it a heap,
An' jest make resolutions that we figger we can keep!"

FANG LAW

by TOM ROAN

Fang Law

THE night was eerie and cold. At times a raw north wind beat and mourned along the face of the frozen cliffs high-walling the far side of the sheet of ice that was the dead-still river. At other times it was breathlessly quiet, with no snow in the air at all and only the cold stars blinking like white eyes in the sky and a round moon beginning its rise over the Rockies to start painting the broken mountain world with mellow-gold light.

When the cry arose it was during one of those soundless periods. No breath of air was stirring. Every flake of snow, picked up in the higher hills by the wind, had settled. The hush that had come was like something frightfully tense and still, an indefinite period of silence before stark tragedy struck.

It came suddenly, a terrific sound let loose in an ear-piercing, nerve-shattering scream, a cry that tore out of the middle of that grip of silence with all the fierce shock and reverberating crash of some two-legged hunter's powerful rifle whistling an unexpected bullet through a dead-quiet afternoon.

It was not long. It held for five seconds at the most, a wail, a shriek filled with appalling anguish, a trapped cougar's fierce call to her mate for help—a resounding cry of sudden rage and helplessness, broken with a downward pitch of heart-rending agony.

Hyak heard it. He had just come out of the mouth of the old den in the cliffs and had moved forward to an ice-bearded crag thrust out into space and overhanging the ice of the river, a straight, mile-down drop.

It stung him to the bone, like a blade of ice driven suddenly to the marrow. He snarled. His eyes two yellow-ball lamps of glowing fire in the moonlight, he whirled, moving so quickly that his padded and sharp-clawed feet slipped on the ice of the crag, half throwing him. For an instant it looked as if he was about to plunge out into space, but he righted himself with a sudden scramble of cougar swiftness, and then his ten-foot streak of tan lightning on the move was bounding up the ledges.

He was a thing of infuriated grace and rippling muscles when he reached the top of the cliffs. A massive specimen of his kind he plunged to a halt, three hundred pounds of fierceness and suspicion that dropped as lightly as a feather on an ice-coated rock to take stock of the surroundings.

He did not hear her again for almost two minutes. The wind came back with a sudden groan. Snow came hurling down from the laden branches of the trees and swirled barrel-rolling clouds around him. The wind rose higher and bawled like a dying steer along the ledges below and behind him, holding on for a long minute before it fell away and perished to southward. In the lull that followed he heard her second call to him.

The cry was much weaker this time. It sounded as if Toto, his mate, was moving farther away from him now. The cry was not as fierce. It had lost something. It came as if the fount of strength behind it was beginning to run low, but it was a call to him for help just the same, and there was the same intermingling notes of hurt, helplessness and anger. It was an urgent demand for him to come, and he shot forward from the rock, a mountain lion now

going directly to the root of all the mysterious evil; a lion on the way to investigate the tragedy of this raw winter night.

IT looked like the end for Toto when he came in sight of her two hundred yards west of the top of the cliffs. She lay almost against the foot of another wall of cliffs, an eighty-foot rise of stone and ice thrust skyward just behind her.

Toto was in a trap, but it did not look like a trap. She lay between four trees with a heavy log on her back and two other logs under her belly with a three-foot opening between them that had been properly spaced so as to aid in the breaking of the back of any large animal that happened to walk beneath the heavy log that had been suspended as a great bar, ready to drop down the natural slot formed by the two trees under it.

It was something new in the way of a trap—a neat job where both nature and man had conspired. It had been here for weeks, a deadfall of deadfalls, constructed so cunningly that no animal had even suspected it. Nature itself helped make it foolproof. Two bulky shoulders of the rocks ran out, forming high, ice-coated walls at either side of it. Any animal that came down from the top of the cliffs would walk right under the suspended log, and if the animal was large enough the strong trigger would be sprung.

And there lay Toto, and in front of her—yet warm from her quick kill somewhere in the cliffs behind her—was a full-grown mountain sheep, a big ram that had met death with such lightning swiftness he had scarcely known what struck him down.

Ever wary, ever alert to the treachery of the traps of two-legged hunters who sometimes stalked these high Rockies, Hyak halted. He looked cautiously to the right and left. The long tail lashed savagely as every muscle tensed itself for a spring away from danger. Very gingerly, Hyak lifted a forefoot, moving it forward. As it touched the snow it halted, stiffening, the claws unsheathing, a movement arrested by a second cry that came out of the night.

It soared up out of the shadow pools and moonlight, and came tumbling and tossing down from the top of the cliffs behind Toto like the far-flinging spray of a waterfall. It was sharp and lone, an expanding and growing cry reaching miles away with its keen intensity. It swung to its highest pitch, hung shrill and fierce in the frosty air, and pitched drunkenly away in a savage wail that died in an angry hiss of echoing and reëchoing whispers.

Lobo, the one-eyed fighting wolf, was up and about, attracted by the smell of blood from Toto's kill and ready to bargain for war. His cry was a call to his fellows, and soon Hyak heard an answering wail, a faint, far-muted chord from a mile or more beyond the cliffs.

Another cry rang out of the cold world to southward as the first answer to Lobo died away. Then came another and another, so faint and far they were like light, bright bars of some song murmuring down the mountain backs from the north wind.

There would be trouble here before long. With that dangerous Lobo calling up his ever-bickering and fighting pack, there would soon be many shapes stealing toward the foot of the cliffs where the helpless Toto was lying. Both Toto and her kill would know the cruelty of keen fangs.

HYAK moved on. He was not foolish about it. He took his time. With a wise pair of eyes he studied the logs. This thing did not look like a trap. A great deal of snow and ice lay at either end of it. The log that would have snapped a grizzly's back like a dry twig had been arrested by the mounds of ice and snow. Toto was not yet exactly hurt. She was bent into a V-shape of fury, but her back was not broken.

She snarled at Hyak as he came up and cautiously pushed his nose close to her muzzle. The snarl was born more of anger than pain. She was tight stuck here in this thing. She wanted out, and she wanted out in a hurry. Her snarl as good as told him that.

He walked suspiciously around the deadfall and came up behind Toto. She lashed him across the muzzle with her tail. He leaped back, stumbling in the snow. As he plunged up, Lobo's second long wail came down to him. He looked up the cliffs, baring his fangs at his unseen foe up there in the darkness.

Only one far-away answer came back this time, but Hyak knew a thing or two about those fighters of the wilderness. The wolves that had answered were closing in. That meant that the danger was growing here under the cliffs.

Hyak let out one fierce cougar cry. It was like a woman's wild, reverberating scream of terror, a sound that came bursting out of near-leather lungs to go shooting up to the top of the cliffs and spreading fan fashion all over the cold hills. In it was desperation and mad fighting fury, a challenge to all the sneaky trickery he could sense closing in around him and his helpless mate. No cry came back from Lobo. The old wolf was a wise one, his single, bright-copper eye seeing everything. Hyak could picture him in all his cunning, with his wolf tongue lolling, a fiendish grin on his face.

With another snarl at the cliffs, Hyak turned back to Toto. He circled the logs again. He even paused to smell of the big ram. The meat was good, his favorite, but no thought of eating came to him. He was in desperate straits. A tremendous job faced him here, but he lacked the intelligence to handle it.

It was that sheer lack of intelligence that almost freed Toto from beneath the heavy log on her back. The north end of the big stick was buried in the snow and ice. The other end was still tilted upward at an angle of thirty degrees and held there by a thick mass of snow and ice pressed against the ribs of the captured cougar's right side. That mass of snow and ice had been the very thing that had saved Toto's back from being broken.

But Hyak did not know that. He knew very little of this awful business that had brought such woe to his mate. Like a good husband who desperately wanted to do something and did not know how, he kept moving around the logs, while Toto kept snarling at him, commanding him in cougar fashion to do something.

He was panicky. He picked up the ram, flung it across his shoulder and started off with it. It was a befuddled husband's way of telling a squalling and snarling wife that she should shake herself loose from that log and follow. Toto tried it, but the log held, and Hyak moved back, dropping the ram in front of her.

Now he tried to lick her on the nose, an attempt to show her that everything was yet all right, that there was no hurry, no need of getting excited about this thing. Toto

promptly snapped at him, so quickly and viciously that he floundered back on his rump in a quick jump to get away from her.

Undaunted, he moved on around the logs and came up behind her again. Now his stupidity came into play. He hopped up on the log and leaned forward to lick Toto on the back of the neck. His additional weight on the log brought a scream of terror from the sleek female. It was so quick, so fierce, it was startling. Hyak leaped nimbly up the rise of the log in a hasty scramble to get out of her way.

And the log moved! Hyak's weight made a lever out of it. It shook its north end out of the snow and ice. For a moment Toto was free, and she was quick to take advantage of it. She started forward. In the wink of an eye she would have been free, but the moving log frightened Hyak. With a squall of fear he leaped from it, and the north end dropped back, bringing another one of those squalls of terror.

It looked simply awful now. There was Toto, almost free, but her right hind leg had been captured by the falling end of the log. She let loose with all her fierceness on Hyak, her snarls and screams blaming him for everything. Had he been in reach of her she would have given him a clouting no husband would have forgotten, but he knew this otherwise good wife's temper. A typical henpecked Henry, Hyak sat down and licked his chops, waiting for the storm to blow itself out, and not yet realizing how he had managed to help her as much as he really had.

THEN, as suddenly as a slap, Toto's snarling and powerful cat yowling changed. There was a warning snarl of danger, and she dropped flat against the log, her eyes blazing sudden fires of hate and alarm as she looked beyond Hyak.

He could understand that. With a snarl he leaped toward her, whirling in the air as he leaped, his rump jamming against hers. In front of him a new danger leered, and the scent that filled the air angered him from the end of his nose to the tip of his lashing long tail.

A pair of eyes were watching him and the helpless Toto. They were round and luminous disks of shining gold with an ugly slit of cruel darkness in their centers. They were fearless eyes, the eyes of a born fighter. Above them were two pointed ears cocking forward and flattening nervously against a round, wicked head. Below the ears a mouth had tensed open, its four knife-sharp fangs glinting like yellow blades. Behind the head—with every muscle and tendon set and quivering with intensity like a rattlesnake hard-coiled and ready to strike home with death—was a forty-pound body of mottled damnation, a mass of cold, calculating fury trembling with eagerness to start the battle and the blood flowing.

Forgotten now was Lobo, the old one-eyed pack king. Here was an enemy who, once aroused, would make two Lobos turn their tails to her except in a most desperate situation. For here was old Puss-puss, the lynx, a beast to be avoided as a wolverene or a den chock-full of poisonous reptiles.

And the slit-eyed devil had not come alone. To her right, half hiding behind a low cluster of snow-mounded brush, another pair of those furious, wickedly slitted eyes took form. No sooner had that pair appeared when another set came into being.

For a moment the picture was like

that, still and terrible to look at—a pause of the enemy to show its fighting fangs for just a second before shuttling forward to the fight. Then the wind came, a swooping, bawling gust hurling down upon the scene to blot and distort it with spinning clouds of picked-up snow.

IT was treachery from the very beginning. Puss-puss shifted while the wind was blowing. Cunning in all affairs where blood was to be spilled, she took advantage of those blowing clouds of snow, advancing behind them until she was a short twenty feet away from Hyak and his downed Toto when the wind and snow died out of the air. She was right there, belly down, claws all set, wicked ears twitching, and the two cats with her had moved up, fierce flank fighters ready to enter the struggle as soon as Puss-puss passed them the signal for the business to begin.

Hyak snarled his best snarl at them. Even the smell of those infernal cats was enough to make him sick, and the air was full of that smell now—a cat stench tinctured strongly with the even worse odor of carrion, a good sign that these devils had probably been out robbing a buzzard roost.

Puss-puss snarled back, slitted eyes unwavering in their leer at Hyak's broad face. She growled at him, an old trick to terrify her foe. The sound began with a low rumble, a quarrelsome whisper, a nagging whine that ground out of that ugly cat throat and slowly rose to a nerve-chilling yowl.

It was a demand for the meat, a cat-squalling order for Hyak to move back from the dead ram so that the worst old poacher of the Rockies—one that sometimes ate her own kittens—could come forward and take charge of the juicy kill. At the same time, the big cat seemed to know that Toto was helpless there against the logs, and if Hyak could be made to turn tail and desert his mate, the big lioness could be killed without much danger to the cats by a few neatly executed fighting tricks, the main one to be the simple matter of slipping up behind her and reaching through the logs to rip open her unprotected belly.

But Hyak stood his ground. He was in a corner here, and it was a dangerous one, but once cornered, once forced into this thing of merciless blood-letting, he would fight it to the end.

Puss-puss was not to be outdone. She kept trying to bluff him. She tried to force him away from that helpless mate. He was too wise for such cat shines. Toto could not move from the spot, and neither would he! She still had the use of her forefeet and fangs. She could still use them with disastrous results—if the cats would only come close enough to attack her from her side of the logs.

Soon all patience had left Puss-puss. Hyak was not going to make a fool out of himself, and evidently she realized it. Now it was time for direct action. She let out a stronger yowl. It was a signal and a command, and it was immediately answered with the usual lynx treachery to be found in a fight.

Some whisper of the danger came to Hyak. He dropped like a streak, belly flat against the snow, just as a knife-clawed fighting figure hurled through the air from beyond the logs behind him. A pair of fangs nipped at the back of his head. He struck at it, heard a yowl, and saw the figure bound away.

It was old One-ear, the mate of Puss-puss—and that realization

meant there were four instead of three cats in this thing! It was a shock. It was wholly unfair. There was a possibility now that there would be even more of those cats to deal with, but deal with them Hyak would—and he would give no ground.

In a minute they were rushing him. Old One-ear had bounded out of the way. Now he was coming at Hyak from the uptilted end of the log. He came in like a flying shadow while Puss-puss shifted and came in from the north end of the logs to slash at Toto's rump.

Hyak did it neatly. He reached up one mighty paw at the exact instant. In a furious, claw-raking slap, he caught One-ear on the side of the jaw. There was a snarl, a snap like breaking wood, and the lynx was hurled away with half his head torn off and his blood splattering in a long trail through the snow.

NOW Hyak turned to defend Toto. The lioness could not switch around and protect herself. Puss-puss had slashed her repeatedly, and then leaped clear as the other two cats shot in to seize the ram. Hyak caught one of them, lifted him in the air by a stroke across the rump and sent him spinning far out in the snow.

It was bloody massacre from that moment on. Puss-puss played hard for Hyak. He was many times her size, but that did not daunt her. She dived in and out, quicker by far than her enemy. Her near-dead mate plunged into it again. Hyak finished him this time, opening his belly with a gut-stroke, one that disemboweled him in the air and brought a sudden end to the hectic career of the old thief.

The other cats were smaller than Puss-puss, but they were just as quick on their feet. They kept trying to snatch the ram while old Puss-puss engaged Hyak. It was all he could do, but he kept the old ram there beside Toto.

In desperation at last, Puss-puss drew off for a few yards. The other two cats joined her. Evidently they were her near-grown kittens, and there seemed to be a deep understanding among them. They sat quarreling and snarling among themselves for a few moments, and then came after Hyak in a body.

It was fury itself. They swung in after him from behind the logs. He plunged upon the logs again, and again his weight moved the deadfall. It was just a little this time, but the twisting and squirming Toto lost no time. With a scream she jerked her foot free, and brown death on the rampage shot forward to help Hyak with the three cats.

The work was quick and desperate, hot mouth snatching for hot mouth, hoarse animal grunts rising, flashing feet hurling snow. The wind swooped down on them again, hurling along the blinding clouds of loose snow. For two minutes they fought in a regular gale, but they were close together, parrying, sidestepping and side-slipping, the lynx tribe entirely too wise to try to make it an embracing struggle with their big cousins of the cat family.

Slashing and ripping furiously, Hyak got home one solid, side-bursting blow. It broke the back of one of the younger cats, a stroke that lifted the lynx in the air, gutted him with one downward jerk, and sent the mangled body rolling thirty feet away in the snow.

Toto had headed straight for Puss-puss, one fighting female after the blood of another fighting female. Her hind leg and rump were still

numb from the weight of the log, but a little numbness and pain could not stop the battle charge of that big lioness.

Puss-puss was smart enough about it. She was no coward. She did not shrink her part of this fight of her own scheming. She had lived through too many of them in the past, and she made a brave stand. Lighter and quicker on her feet than the big, heavy Toto, she leaped this way and that. She came up on the right side of Toto, a nimble dancer of snarling hate and fire-spitting eyes, and raked the lioness with a claw-cutting stroke that brought the blood.

The second young cat was a coward—one of the few of his kind. He deserted dead father, fighting mother and dying brother. It was probably just as well that he did. The powerful Hyak was after him, battle-heated now beyond all halting. With a backward sprawl and a screaming wail, the lynx turned, stumbled this way and that in his frenzy, and headed for the icy cliffs, bound as fast as his legs would take him for the safer altitude on top of the cliffs and well above the blood, fur and gut-strewn battleground.

Puss-puss turned only when all hope was gone. Hyak and Toto were both after her now. Toto started closing in from one side, Hyak from the other. There would be no chance for her now. She let out one desperate squall of rage and whirled to run for it with Hyak and Toto flashing across the snow behind her.

Suddenly, just when it looked as if the big female and her mate would scoop the lynx off the ground, both lions whirled with a snarl to face a new menace that had slipped upon them during the fight.

Lobo and four of his vicious pack were at hand!

It was thievery of the most treacherous kind. A big black female wolf had sneaked in and caught up the ram. It was about all she could do to get it across her shoulders and stagger away with its legs dragging, but she was brazen enough about it, and the other wolves had formed a circle around her and were trying to guard her in her self-appointed task.

At some other time they might have got away with it. Right now was not the time for it. Hyak's and Toto's blood was at the boiling point. The lust for battle was still upon them. A fanged fighting front, running side by side, shoulder to shoulder, they shot forward.

The circle of wolves split as if a flying wedge was being driven into them. Two of them darted one way, the second two another, as if content to desert the big female to her fate. But the female was smart. She saw what was about to happen in a backward glance, and immediately dropped the ram and bounded on out of danger.

Hyak and Toto stopped when they reached the ram. After all, this choice kill was what they were fighting for. Fighting for meat—first to bring it down and then protect it afterward—was an old, old story to them. Breaths vaporing in the wind, fighting fangs bared and their sides rising and falling like laboring bellows, they stood there, looking at the suddenly growing pack coming up from out of the trees at every hand.

Where there had been only five of the wolves in the beginning, now suddenly four more appeared, then five more, then three. Now there were seventeen of the cunning brutes. Lobo had summoned the whole pack, and they had come from all directions, dangerous dark forms

gliding as softly as running shadows through the night.

Snarling and fighting among the pack began almost at once. A mob had pounced on the claw-riddled body of old One-ear. Another gang had jumped on the body of the younger cat. The wolves fought for the bits, snapping and snarling at each other. Bones crunched. Chops smacked. In no time at all the bodies of old One-ear and the younger cat had disappeared. Even the blood on the snow had been hastily gobbled up by the hungry horde.

Toto had picked up the ram, slinging it across her shoulder. Hyak was just behind her, watching everything, his fierce snarls warning the wolf pack to keep its distance. The pack kept away for a few rods, each wolf knowing the rank suicide of trying to plunge in and make it a fight. But an old female tried it at last, and it was the signal for others to come in and attack from all sides.

It was a bluff that did not turn out well for the wolves. Toto dropped the ram and let out a squall. Hyak threw his rump against her rump, and there they stood, fierce snarls and growls filling the night, the wicked circle of bright-copper eyes easing closer and closer.

Sheer disaster befell the female wolf. She came on until she was within eight feet of the infuriated Toto, and Toto—unable to stand the insulting bluff another instant—suddenly shot forward with her wide mouth open and fangs gleaming.

It was so quick the wolf never had a chance. Toto was upon her like an exploding bundle of damnation. Her wild, terrible squall was enough to freeze the blood of any wolf. For a second it froze the old female in her tracks, and then she went into action. She shot backward, but a clump of ice-coated brush made her stumble. She fell awkwardly. For a split second her unprotected belly was upturned in the moonlight, and Toto's fangs drove straight in.

There was a rip and a tear, and a wolf's wail of pain and terror. Toto hurled her off the ground. She slung her like a dog killing a snake, and with belly torn out and her insides spilling, the wolf was thrown far to one side, a dying thing as she struck the ground at the feet of the lower side of the circle closing in.

SWIFTLY now, Toto retreated, back-jumping to the ram and Hyak. A great snapping and snarling was going on among the wolves by this time. The mob over there on the south side of the circle was attacking the dying female. Sharp fangs tore into her. They were a hungry lot, those wolves, and each fighting and sparring for a chance to taste the female's flesh and blood.

It gave Hyak and Toto another chance. Toto again picked up the ram. They started forward with a rush, the alert Hyak leading the way and flashing back to cover Toto's rear. The wolves broke in front of them. Only a grizzly would have faced those snarling lions in their wild rush now, and the wolves scampered out of the way, some moving back so quickly they stumbled over their own feet.

The rush kept on. For more than a hundred yards the lions kept going. The rim of the cliffs was close at hand now, but the wolves were smart enough. In a body they came snarling and wailing in from behind, engaging the whirling and spinning Hyak while Toto raced on with the ram.

Now the wolves had some chance. A gang stopped Toto near the rim of the cliffs, and another gang were

engaging Hyak. That separated the lions completely, and it made Hyak wild. Before this he had been strictly on the defense. The wolves had not crowded him too closely. They were no match for him. He knew it, and they knew it. What they really wanted was to worry him and his mate until they deserted the ram and took to the trees. That would have been enough for them. They would have gobbled up the ram and would have straggled off to look for some other victim.

But Hyak went into them this time. He was like lightning. A wise old male leaped clear of him, and then tried to hamstring him as he plunged on. With the quickness of a spinning top, Hyak whirled. A left paw shot out and caught the wolf on the shoulder. The snarling lion mouth did the rest. It shot in, met the wolf's fighting fangs, and closed on it. The muzzle of the wolf crushed like a splattering egg, and Hyak hurled him dying to his fellows.

He killed another wolf a moment later. He shot in close and ripped home a side-swiping claw stroke, one that tore open the startled beast's side. Yelping with pain, the wolf whirled away, frightened now of his own kind, knowing that they were ready to pounce on anything where the blood was flowing.

Hyak left them fighting among themselves and shot on to Toto, who had battled it on to the rim of the cliffs. There she stood, half circled by the wolves, the ram still intact and lying in front of her.

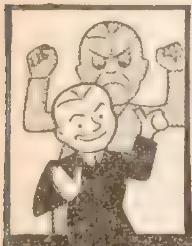
Hyak made short work of the rest. He flung into the wolves from behind. He knocked them to the right and left. He scattered them up and down the cliffs, killing one and ripping open another.

Triumph shone now in the cougar's fire-ball eyes. There was no malice. The fight was over. The wolves were standing back. Behind them stood the murderous old Lobo, one bright eye gleaming. The old devil was a good politician; not a scratch was on him.

With a snarl just to show them his teeth, Hyak turned. He touched noses with Toto. She picked up the ram.

Quietly, just as if nothing had happened, they moved on down the ledge to the safety of their den. The night's work was done. There would be choice eating in the den when the ram was ripped open after the big mates had carefully licked each other's wounds.

THE END.



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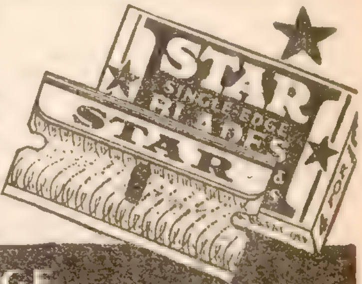

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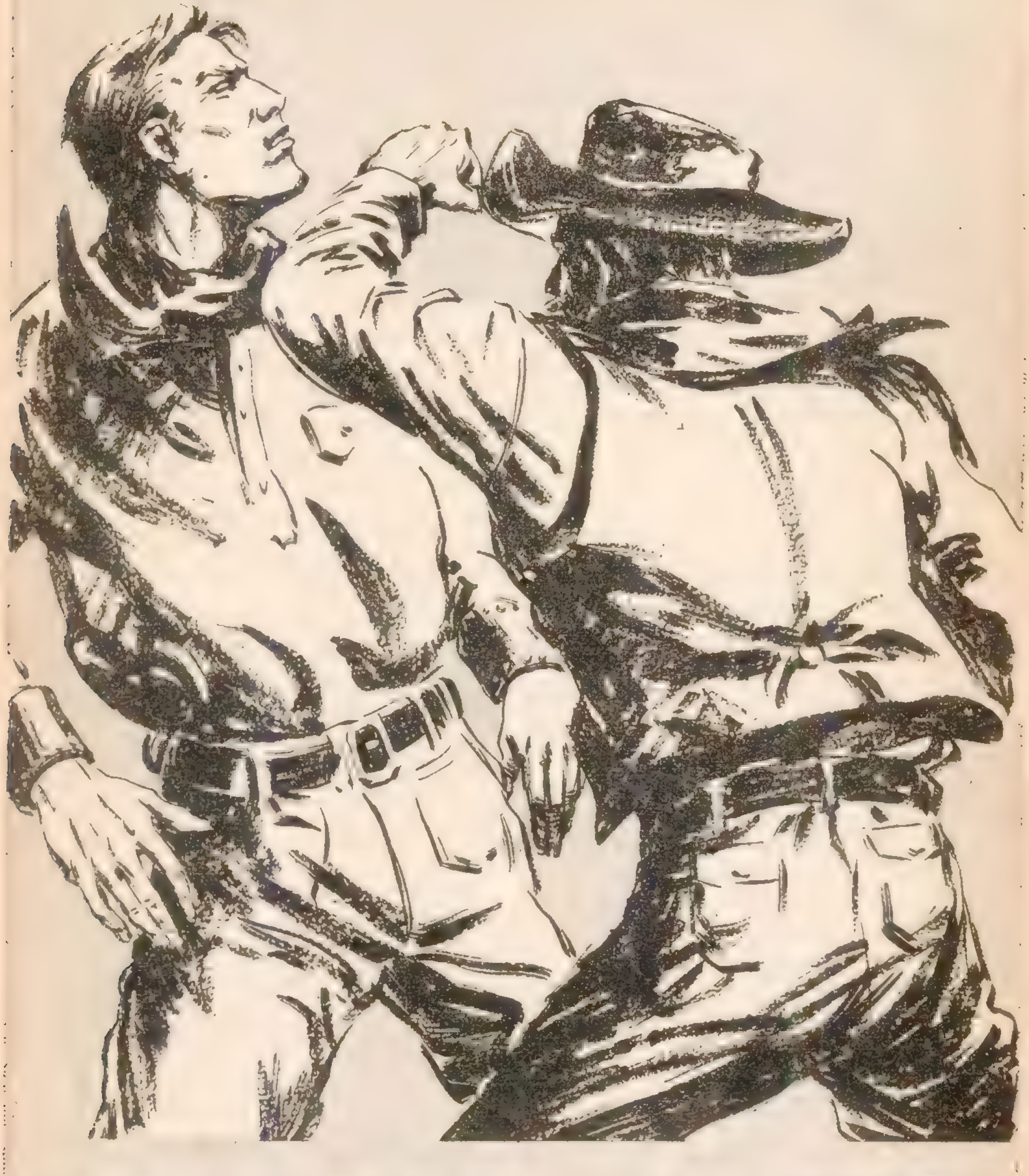

TEST PIT

by LUKE SHORT

Test Pit

TO Jim Goad, who had not seen Nine Troughs in six years, the little town was unchanged, save for a fresh coat of paint on the loading pens. Desert winds off the Owyhee had scoured the store fronts of the one lone street to a slightly more drab gray.

Jim guided his horse into the yard of the small white house farthest from the tracks and dismounted, a lean, blackened lath of a man whose spare movements told of long years of desert living. He knocked on the kitchen door and stepped aside, his bent back to hot sun.

The woman who came to the door was middle-aged, Jim's age, and she did not smile at sight of him.

"Oh, it's you," she said without surprise.

"Howdy, Mrs. Lloyd. Frank here?"

"Step in. You got our letter, I see."

"That's right." Jim stepped into the screened porch and stood there, a man with rain-gray eyes whose gentleness and suffering almost counteracted the hard lines of his thin-lipped mouth.

"Sit down," Mrs. Lloyd said, as she turned into the kitchen, but Jim stood there, his patient face framed for trouble.

Frank Lloyd, when he came out, shook hands, but there was little welcome in his seamed face. He stood there facing Jim, his hands in his pants pockets, a look of anxiety on his face.

"No use beatin' around the bush, Jim," said Lloyd. "We want you to take your boy away."

"That's what you said in your letter. What's the trouble?"

"One trouble is, he's no good," Lloyd answered bluntly. "The other is, he won't work for his keep and we ain't had any money from you for three years."

"I've sent it," Jim said quickly.

Lloyd looked at him sharply. "We never got a cent."

"But I've sent you money regular. Once every three months, ever since I got out of the pen."

"By mail?"

"That's right."

Lloyd made a grimace. "Well, then I reckon young Max has stole it. He brings the mail to us every day." His eyes softened a little as he observed the distress in Jim's face. "I don't like to tell you this, Jim. Hell, I made my bargain with you and I'd like to stick to it. I liked the kid. But he's no damn good."

"No good how?" asked Jim patiently.

"Runnin' around with the wild bunch. Shaggin' on errands for every saloon bum in town. Stealin', fightin', lyin', gamblin', drinkin', and him only seventeen. I figured you better know it before he got in real trouble."

"I reckon I should have took care of him myself."

"That ain't it," Lloyd said, half in anger. "We've treated him like a son. We liked the tyke. Only he ain't no damn good, Jim. No fault of ourn, no fault of yourn. He's just trash."

Jim's gaze flickered up to Lloyd's face, rested there a moment, and then slid away. "Where is he?"

"The Gem or Paradise. Prob'ly passed out in a back room."

"I'll bring him back and we'll have a talk. Then I'll take him away."

"That's best," Lloyd agreed.

JIM went out to his horse and mounted. He headed down the shadeless street toward the handful of business buildings. His face was reflective. He had lived almost in oblivion, a fool's paradise, these last seven years since he'd been out of jail on parole. He liked the Lloyds and they liked him, and he had believed that they could take far better care of his small son than he, a prospector, could. He had written often and sent money at regular intervals, always with the word that he was building his stake and that soon he would come for the boy. But something had happened in that time. Seven years, he realized now, spanned the time when a boy in knee pants grew to manhood. Somewhere back down the line Max had run off the track and it was his, Jim's, fault.

The Paradise was on the corner, fronting the railroad tracks. A dozen horses stood hipshot at the tie rail in front of the wooden awning that ran the short length of Railroad Avenue. Jim looped the reins of his chestnut roan over the rail and turned to the saloon entrance.

He shouldered through the swing doors, the sour, cool smell of beer heavy in the air. Sauntering over to the bar, he waited for his eyes to become adjusted to the light. He asked for a beer and looked around him, feeling his pulse hammer.

There was a half-hearted poker game in progress at one of the tables, five men sitting in. Another puncher had folded back the cloth on the faro table and was slumped over it, asleep. Two unshaven punchers in chairs back-tilted against the wall were watching the poker game.

And at the bar, two men in range clothes, one a little shorter, a little more rawboned than the other, were matching silver dollars on the bar. The slight one was his son Max.

Jim studied him in the bar mirror. There was a kind of insufferable insolence on the kid's face that sent slow anger through Jim. It wasn't a bad face when it dropped its jeering expression—a little too thin, perhaps, but the eyes were deep-set and wide apart, the cheekbones high, the nose straight. The kid's mouth was bad, though, Jim thought, and remembered his own, which was bad in a different way.

Max's eyes were a little bright with liquor, and sweat beaded his upper lip. Still, he managed to smile crookedly even though he lost.

Jim took his beer and moved over beside his son. Max looked up.

"Want to make it three-cornered, grandpa?" he said mockingly.

"Hunh-unh," Jim demurred, his eyes reflective.

"Too high?"

"Too foolish."

"Listen, kid," the other puncher said, "are you goin' to play or talk?"

Max reached up and pulled the man's hat down over his eyes. The puncher wrapped a pair of huge arms around the kid, lifted him off the floor, threw him down and held him with one knee while he rubbed dirty sawdust in his face. Max fought, but futilely. The puncher, laughing, rose and backed away and Max came to his feet furious, cursing. The other men were laughing now.

"Burn him up, rooster," one of them said half affectionately.

Jim looked down into his beer, a little sick. Every saloon had a kid like this, a clown, a fool who aped the bullies, who talked too loud and bragged too much, and who finally drifted into the bunch of loafers living on rustled stock, crooked card

games and easy stage holdups.

Max, still cursing under his breath, turned to the bar and picked up his dollars.

"Know me, son?" Jim asked quietly.

Max looked at him, his face surly. "Why the hell should I?" he snarled.

"I'm your old man," Jim murmured.

MAX stared at him, and then his face settled into a sneer. "Well, well, if it ain't old paroled pappy." He made no move to shake hands. Jim could see behind the anger in the kid's eyes, and there was hurt there. "If you want money, I ain't got it."

"I never did want money from you," Jim said. "Come to that, Frank says you got most of what I've sent anyway."

Max's thin face flushed. "Frank's a liar!"

Jim didn't say anything.

"What *do* you want?" Max asked.

"I'm workin' a claim over in Utah that looks pretty good. I figured maybe you'd like to come and work it with me."

"Swing a single-jack all day in the sun? Hell with that!" Max said curtly. Then he laughed, that same short ugly laugh, and turned to the table of card players. As his body twisted, Jim saw something that he hadn't noticed before. There was a six-gun rammed in the waistband of the kid's Levis.

"Listen to this, fellers," Max announced. "The parole board down in Utah give my old man here permission to come and see me. You know what for? He wants me to throw in with him on a prospect hole."

"Better wait till next week when you have a stake, kid," the puncher at the faro table called, above the crowd's jeering laughter.

"Shut up!" one of the gamblers said to the puncher.

But Jim was only half listening. He was thinking just one thing: Max had opened his last letter, for in that letter Jim had mentioned getting the permission of the Utah parole board to leave the State.

He looked up in time to see the sneer on his son's face.

"Well, old man," Max said, "maybe you liked breakin' rock in the pen so good you want to keep it up. But not me."

Jim did what he had been wanting to do for five minutes. He hit the kid in the jaw, hit him hard and clean and with a little more power than he had intended. The laughter of the men trailed off to silence as Max hit the floor. He lay there motionless, his hand jerking a little.

Jim looked up from him to see one of the poker players put down his cards and stand up. The man wore a deputy sheriff's badge.

"Mister," the man said slowly, "that kid is a friend of ours."

"So I notice." Jim's voice was dry. "I'm takin' him out of here." He stepped over to Max and knelt beside him. He put both hands on the kid's hips, ready to lift him to his shoulder, when some inner caution prompted him to look up at the table of players. The big man who had spoken was going for his gun.

What Jim did next was instinct, unpremeditated. He yanked the gun from Max's waistband. His movement hurried the big man, who swung his gun up and shot. The slug boomed into the bar front.

Jim jerked Max's gun out and shot. He saw the big man twist, trip over his chair and slam backward against the wall, clapping a hand over his forearm. The others started to back away, but Jim

swung the gun in a loose arc to include them all, the bartender, too.

"Anybody else feel froggy?" he asked mildly. His face was hard as granite. "I come to take this kid away," he continued. "I don't reckon you'll stop me."

"You're stopped already," one of the players said. "You're a paroled man and you threw a gun on a peace officer."

"All it takes is a letter to Utah," added a second puncher.

For a moment Jim said nothing, his face momentarily revealing his indecision.

"Better give up that gun," one of the men said.

Jim shook his head then, his mind abruptly made up. What these men said was true; his parole would be revoked. The circumstances of the gunplay wouldn't count because the cards were already stacked against him. That being the case, he was going through with it.

"I'll take a chance on that." He herded them against the wall, the bartender, too. At his terse orders, two of the punchers carried Max out and tied him in his saddle.

As soon as the cinches on the remaining horses, save his own big chestnut, were cut, Jim backed out into the street and mounted. The men had crowded in the doorway, watching.

"I'm headin' across the dry patch for the Toands," Jim said. "It's a long ride to water there and I'm goin' to gut a calf in that sink. Mebbe you better not follow me, because you won't find fit water."

"We'll have you 'fore you reach there," one of the men called.

Jim nodded and cut Max's horse across the rump. They didn't get a shot at him before he crossed the tracks and was out on the sage flats, running behind Max's horse at an easy lope. He had a good five-mile headstart before he saw the funnel of dust rising far behind, and by that time Max had been jogged into consciousness. The kid pulled up then and Jim put his horse over beside him.

MAX touched his jaw gingerly, then felt for his hat, which was missing, and finally brought his furious glance to bear on his father.

"You hit me," he said.

"You're damn right I did," Jim said calmly. "I aim to hit you plenty more times before I'm finished with you."

Jim saw him reach furtively around his waist to see if his gun was still there, and the older man smiled wryly.

"Where you takin' me?" Max demanded.

Jim pointed off toward the fawn-colored Toands. "There. From there on to Utah, soon's we shake your friends."

"Bart'll make it hell for you!" Max blurted out.

"Who's he?"

"The deputy sheriff. My friend."

"I made it hell for myself already," Jim drawled. "Now we better move, deputy or no deputy."

Jim made no move to untie Max's feet, which were tethered under the horse's belly. They rode at an alternate walk and a lope through the hot afternoon. Once Max tried to break away and turn back, but Jim, who had the better horse, soon overtook him.

Standing up in his saddle, Jim cuffed the kid until Max covered his face with his arms.

"No more of that," Jim said grimly. "Now turn around and let's get goin'."

The telltale dust cloud of the pur-

suers drew closer toward evening, but Jim didn't increase the pace. They rode on through the night, silent, neither saying a word.

At dawn they came to the Toand Sinks, a shallow pool on the dry flats at the foothills of the barren mountains. Before they approached it, Jim untied Max's feet and made him dismount, then he led his horse a good distance away. A cow was grazing near the waterhole.

Jim called Max up for a drink. When they and their horses had drunk their fill, Jim did as he had promised, much as he hated the idea. As a prospector who had staked his life many a time and often on the remote waterholes of a dozen desert mountain ranges, he knew he was committing an unforgivable crime. But it would be a greater crime if he let himself and Max be caught.

He shot the cow, gutted her and dragged her, entrails trailing, into the shallow sink. No animal would drink from this waterhole hereafter, and the posse would have to turn back.

From here on, he knew he was safe, for he was familiar with these dry mountains. Every move was laid out, like a checkerboard, from waterhole to waterhole. They might go hungry, but they would have water.

Two nights later, high in the Toands, they shared a brace of sage hens between them, then hobbled their horses along the narrow strip of grass that fringed a trickle of spring water.

Jim squatted on one side of the fire, smoking, watching the sullen sunburned face of his son. Max eyed him with a smoldering hatred that made Jim wonder for a moment if he were attempting the impossible.

"You can't stay mad forever," Jim observed quietly. "Better take it the best way you can, son."

"Mad or not," Max said hotly, "I'll break away the first chance I get."

"Why?"

Max started to say something. Then he stopped, groping for words. "I don't want to be anywhere around you."

"Why?"

"I was doin' all right. I had friends. I wasn't goin' back to the Lloyds. I can make my own livin'."

"Rustlin' stock?"

Max colored a little.

"The Lloyds never raised you that way, Max," Jim went on. "They're decent people. What happened to you?"

"They made me work too hard."

"Hell, everybody's got to work too hard in this world."

"Not them boys at the Paradise."

"They'll stretch rope yet. Or they'll wind up in the pen."

"You ought to know," Max sneered.

"That's right," Jim said gravely. "I ought to know what I'm talkin' about." He paused. "I killed a man once for botherin' your mother. I paid for it. My son was born and my wife died while I was in jail. You was nine before I saw you. It wasn't—"

"And you ain't seen me much since, have you?" Max interrupted.

Jim winced, but his gaze did not falter. "No. That's what I'm tryin' to fix now. I thought other people could raise you better than me. I reckon I was wrong."

"WELL, it's too late now!" Max said in a low, passionate voice. "I tried to go to school, but they all knew my old man was a killer. Every time I stepped out of line at the Lloyds, I'd

catch hell. They thought I was goin' wrong, instead of figurin' I was just a kid! And a hell of a lot you cared! You never cared enough to help."

"I sent money to Lloyds and you stole it."

"It was mine, wasn't it!"

Jim was silent, baffled, unable to see where justice lay. His own guilt he did not evade. He had been a sick and miserable man during those years, with little thought for anybody except himself. Still that didn't entirely explain Max. But whoever was guilty, he was bound that it was going to be set right now.

"All right, kid. Forget it. Let's start over."

"Hell with that! I'm on my own."

"But you'll stick with me," Jim said gently, "until you're man enough to run away and make it stick."

Max scrambled to his feet, his face determined. "I'm man enough now! Stand up!"

"And what?"

"Fight! If I lick you, I go."

"And if I lick you, you stay."

"No. I'll go anyway! Stand up!"

Jim came slowly to his feet, his eyes still baffled. "I don't savvy you, kid. I can whip hell out of you and you know it."

"You hit me there in the Paradise when I wasn't lookin' for it!" Max burst out. "You cuffed me on my horse when I couldn't fight back. But try and do it now." And then he rushed at Jim, arms flailing.

Jim waited for him, and then slugged out. His leathery old muscles put a drive in the punch like a mule's kick. His fist cut through Max's guard and caught him on the jaw. The kid went down, but got right up and rushed in. Again Jim knocked him down.

Max got up, crying now, and sailed in again.

Jim could have hit him any time and ended the fight, but he wanted to prove to the kid that his old man could take everything he could give. In his fury Max had maneuvered Jim so that his back was to the fire. Jim was slowly giving ground, grunting under the rain of blows.

Suddenly, he felt heat on his leg and, looking down, saw he was standing almost in the fire. He lifted his foot to step aside, swiveling his head up, and then the blow landed! He saw it coming, tried to duck and couldn't. It crashed into his jaw, sending him off balance. His boot caught on a rock and he fell heavily, and then something crashed into the back of his head like the merciless drive of a sledge.

THE sun wakened him, and for a moment he stared at the sky, conscious only of the throb in his head. Gingerly, he raised his head and felt of it, and his fingers touched matted blood. He rose to a sitting position and looked around the camp, but even as he did so he knew what he would see.

Max was gone. A lucky blow, a rock in the way of Jim's fall, had given him his precious escape. Jim rose and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw his horse cropping the short grass downstream. He felt in his waistband and found his gun still there. The kid had left in a panic, with no water, no food, and no gun, and Jim knew he was headed back to Nine Troughs.

He backtracked the old trail for a day. That noon, where the trail forked, he saw where Max had left the old trail for a new one. It was neither hunger nor thirst that forced him to do it, for Jim saw signs at a waterhole where the kid

had both drunk and snared a rabbit. No, Max was up to something.

When, on the next morning, Jim found where the dim trail joined a road, he paused and read the story in the dust. Max had waited here. Presently, when five horsemen rode by, he joined them, heading up the road. And that road, Jim knew, led to the Toand Glory Mine, whose free-milling gold ore was the richest in the country.

It was then that Jim recalled the half-remembered conversation in the saloon, when Max had announced to those men that his father wanted him to prospect in Utah.

"Better wait till next week, kid, when you'll have a stake," one of the men had said. And another man had shut him up. Could the Toand Glory be providing the stake?—Jim wondered.

It was on a hunch then, prompted by uneasy fear, that Jim headed for the Toand Glory. By evening he was within sight of it, and he was hungry, thirsty and dog-tired. It took some will power to resist dropping down off the ridge and hunting food and shelter at the mine buildings, which lay in a shallow cup of the bare hills. But if he did that, one of the six riders might be watching and spot him.

The Toand Glory Mine was several hundred yards up the slope of the hill. Below it and to one side where the mountain leveled off for the valley was the reduction mill. Twenty slab shacks and a store lay strung out in the valley, the homes and commissary of the miners.

From his vantage point on the hill, Jim waited until darkness, fully expecting to see, toward dark, a spring wagon loaded with bullion for shipment. But nothing happened. At dark, when the shifts changed, a lantern was hung on the porch of the reduction-mill office, and that was all. No signs of a shipment being got ready, nothing but the nightly activity of a mine working two shifts.

Had he guessed wrong? As the lights went out in the miners' shacks after supper, he almost believed he had. Max and the wild bunch must be headed somewhere else. And then he noticed something that was curious, and made him suspicious again. The reduction mill didn't work a night shift. The ore, on cable buckets, was being dumped behind the mill, but the mill itself was dark, deserted. And in the mill office, of course, was the bullion.

A man with daring, knowing the habits of the Toand Glory, might find it easier to steal bullion at the mine at night than to overpower a heavily guarded shipment.

As soon as Jim realized that, he left his hiding place and made his way down the slope. Once in the dark gloom of the valley he worked through the rocks toward the mill porch, on which the lantern hung.

A tool shed stood between him and the mill office, and he drifted into its shadow. Approaching the corner he stopped and peered across at the barred windows of the mill office. Inside, he saw something move, and his heart started to hammer. That might be Max in there!

Poking his head carefully around the corner, he saw a dim clot of figures behind the mill office. It was a man, holding six horses.

Jim Goad made up his mind then. He pulled the gun from his waistband, set himself, then dashed across the open stretch to the mill office.

"Dad! Don't go in there!" he heard a voice yell.

But Jim couldn't stop. He lunged on, hitting the door with his shoulder. It was already unlocked,

and off balance, he lunged into the room and sprawled on his face.

A gun racketed out from the dark depths of the office, and Jim rolled over, answering it with a snap shot. He heard a man yell, and then a table tipped over. The whole place exploded now in a racket of gunfire. The robbers were panicked, shooting at the doorway. By their gun flames down the long room, Jim could see they were bunched together in front of the safe. He fanned his gun at that line of fire, and then his hammer fell on an empty chamber.

"Rush him!" a man yelled, realizing that Jim's gun was empty.

There was a crash of furniture as they came at him. There were only two of them left, Jim could see, but without bullets in his gun they would get him. He cursed softly, fumbling with the shells in his pocket, just as the opening fusillade ripped out.

AND then Max came running through the door behind him. Jim looked up at the sound of pounding feet and saw the youngster running in, a gun in each hand. Those guns were shooting, too, as fast as the nimble fingers of a kid could fan them.

Jim saw one man go down, and then, with a wild urgency upon him, he threw his empty gun at the remaining man, just as the man swiveled his guns on Max. The weapon caught the man in the face, and his guns yanked up, exploding. And in that second, Max drove his shots.

The man jerked twice, dropped his gun and fell over backward, and then the night settled into a silence that seemed unendurable to Jim.

"Thanks, kid," he said briefly. "You better light a shuck."

Max didn't answer immediately, and Jim thought he could hear activity outside.

"They'd have killed you," Max said. There was a kind of dread awe and fear in his voice, something Jim hadn't heard before. It filled him with a sudden flood of thankfulness.

"Beat it, kid!" he repeated, his voice harsh with emotion.

"They'd've gunned you like a locoed steer," Max went on, anger in his voice. "My dad. They was my friends and they'd've killed my dad."

Jim was sure now that he heard the sound of running feet, and it was growing louder. "Kid, get out while you can!" he said sharply.

"No," Max said softly. "I'll take my medicine." Jim could see him turn his head and knew his son was looking at him. "You were right, dad. And I don't reckon I'm any better than them killers. Only, when I get through payin' for this, I hope it won't be too late to show you I know I was a wrong-guesser and you were a right one."

There wasn't time for more. Jim wheeled to face a dozen men with lanterns and guns that boiled through the doorway.

"What is this?" a man in boots and corduroy breeches demanded.

Jim got a grip on himself. He'd fought for the kid already, fought for him when it looked as if he wasn't worth it. Now he was going to fight again, because he knew the kid was worth it. He nodded toward the head of the room.

"They was aimin' to rob the bullion safe." He was looking at Max, watching the kid's eyes.

The superintendent walked back with another man and examined the robbers. There were five of them, all of them from the same bunch that Jim had seen in the saloon.

And the last man to go down, the one Max had shot, was Bart Murray, the deputy sheriff.

The super paused above Bart and stirred him with the toe of his boot. He made a grimace.

"That's a good end to one bad lawman." He looked up at Jim. "How'd you know about this?"

Max answered before Jim had a chance. "My old man was on his way to Utah—"

"*We* was on our way to Utah," Jim prompted.

Max looked at him, unafraid. Jim suddenly realized that Max was going to tell of his guilt in this crime, going to take his medicine and a lot more.

"Me and the younker was on our way to our prospect in Utah," Jim said quickly, panic driving his speech. "We spotted this bunch of gunnies cuttin' across the road. I knew about this mine, and figured they was up to no good. We trailed 'em up here just in time to step into this."

"You knew these men?" the super questioned.

Jim nodded. "I did. I got in an argument with the deputy—"

"Bart Murray?"

"Yes. Him and me had words in Nine Troughs. He crowded me into goin' for a gun. I'm a paroled man, mister, and that meant I'd go back to the pen for drawin' a gun on a peace officer." Jim paused. "He was a dirty man, with a dirty heart. When I seen him, I suspected the worst, and it looks like I'm right."

The super grinned faintly.

"Look here," Max said earnestly to the super. "If you wrote the Utah parole board and said the peace officer was only a holdup artist hidin' behind the badge, do you reckon they'd let dad stay out of jail?"

The super looked at the kid, whose face was insolent no longer, whose eyes were unafraid. And then he looked at Jim and saw him for what he was, a prospector of the old school, than which, he knew, there is no better kind of man alive. He grinned at Max.

"I think I could, son. I think they'd believe me, too. And I think my company will give him a reward."

Max looked over at Jim, and there was sudden decision and pride in his eyes.

"I don't reckon he'll wait for it," he said slowly. "My old man and me are honin' to get back to work, good, honest work."

THE END.

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MARK

Vanishing Cows

by B. Bristow Green

Vanishing Cows

LOOKING down a sheer precipice to the desert that stretched beyond the Mexican border twelve miles south, Lew Fenton muttered to himself, "It's shore no country for rustlers." He twisted in the saddle to scan the barren heights behind him and added, "Nor range detectives neither."

It was hard to believe that beyond those sun-blasted ridges the north slope of the mountains was green and ran down to good grass country.

The sudden pricking of his pony's ears pulled him sharply alert. From some point above came faintly the plaintive lowing of thirsty cattle. Fenton put his horse up the steep slope and zigzagged across its jagged crest. The bawling was clearer but still distant.

Crossing a second ridge, the sound seemed to come from ahead and below. The cattle, he judged, were being driven up a canyon. There was but one such gash near. He pointed his horse toward it and, with disconcerting abruptness, the bellowing ceased.

"Uh huh," he muttered disgustedly. "I knowed there was a ketch in it."

He came to the rim of the canyon and sent a searching glance along its depths. There was no movement, no sound. "And me plumb sober," he grumbled. "Anyway, the horse heard that bawlin'." The canyon was rock walled and rock floored. There was not a sprig of grass there nor on the stony slopes on either side. "It just ain't no place for—"

A shot cracked and bullet whined away from his saddlehorn. He rolled from the saddle, snatched his rifle and wormed out to the edge of the canyon rim. As his eyes raked the depths he almost welcomed that shot. There could be nothing imaginary about its vicious whine and it was the first break on the toughest job he had ever tackled. And it might throw some light on what had happened to Chuck Callahan.

Callahan had been sent on this same job. Two weeks later his boots and hat had come to the office of the Cattlemen's Association by express in a gunny sack. In the package was a note: *Buzzards are plumb partial to range dicks."*

Fenton realized now that Callahan had probably been bushwhacked in this same canyon. He was edging out for a clearer view when a second slug made him duck.

WHEN he looked again, he caught the swish of a horse's tail near a boulder under the farther wall and made out a man kneeling there with a rifle half raised. Fenton lined his sights and squeezed the trigger. The man jerked and a second shot dropped him.

"I judge we got us a rustler, pardner," Fenton told his horse as he urged him toward a break leading down into the canyon. Five minutes later, bending over the man he had shot, he saw that he was a stranger. He was bleeding freely but neither wound was likely to be fatal.

"For a bushwhackin' coyote, you got off lucky," Fenton told him bluntly.

The man's eyes widened. "I didn't shoot at you."

"No?" Fenton said unbelievingly. "Just a tip for me to get out of these hills. You can tell it to the sheriff

in Cold Springs." Then he saw something that whipped him to his feet. On the floor of the canyon were unmistakably fresh signs of cattle.

Some days before, Fenton had found the mouth of this canyon where it opened out onto the grass land. There were bushes there that might tempt stock to hide out in it but they would never have drifted of their own accord into this barren gash.

Fenton snatched the man's rifle, jerked an ivory-butted revolver from his holster and swung into the saddle. Catching the reins of the other horse, he looked down at the wounded man.

"I judge you'll keep till I get back," he said, and rode up the canyon. When he was out of sight, he left the led horse ground-hitched and went on.

The head of the canyon opened into a barren basin of considerable area hemmed in by high cliffs. Fenton halted at the edge of the basin to sweep it with wary eyes. There were neither men, horses nor cattle, but neither was there any break in the steep walls through which cattle could have been driven farther.

The utter stillness puzzled him. Not many minutes had elapsed since he heard those cattle. They could not have been driven any great distance in that short time.

He had heard of this basin. Quartz Gulch, it was called. It was a ghost mining camp long abandoned. His searching eyes picked up fresh signs of cattle leading toward a small lake fed by seepage from the fissure veins. He followed the signs, alert for any movement on the cliffs. But nothing moved and there was only the sound of his pony's shod hoofs. The signs ended at the lake. Beyond, cliffs reared high with only a narrow ledge between their base and the water, a slanting ledge too narrow for cattle to be driven along.

Fenton looked toward the west end of the basin where weathered buildings and the abandoned mines lay. There was no break in the rock walls. The east end was equally impassable. Besides, the cattle had not turned either to the right or left. The signs ended at the water's edge.

Fenton rode around the pool and along the narrow ledge. Rocks had fallen from the cliffs and one big slab stood upright against the wall leaving barely room for his horse to pass. There were no signs of cattle.

Coming back to his starting point, he looked down at the water, then stared frowningly at the bluffs. "Maybe this heat melted the critters and they just vanished." His mouth tightened grimly. "That bushwhackin' son will know where they vanished to."

When he got back to the wounded man, Fenton saw that before he could get any information he would have to get him to a doctor. Loss of blood had made him almost unconscious. Fenton got the man's horse, lifted him into the saddle and headed down the canyon.

IT was past noon when they pulled up at a bunkhouse. Fenton knew that he was on range belonging to the J K Cattle Company, the largest outfit in the district. Answering his hail, a big man opened the bunkhouse door.

"Got a fellow here that's been shot up some and can't make it to town," Fenton said abruptly.

A short puncher joined the first man, and the two came out. They stared at the wounded man but made no immediate move to lift him from his horse. Their attitude

struck Fenton as strange.

"How come he got shot?" the big man asked.

"Tried to bushwhack me back in the hills," said Fenton curtly. "I was lucky, him too. His wounds ain't nothin' but he's lost blood. A bandage and an hour's rest would fix him to travel."

As the two lifted the man down, the short one said, "Where'll we put him, Zorn?"

Fenton's interest quickened. So this was Blake Zorn, local manager of the J K. He was big, strong, square-jawed and intelligent-looking. A good cattle man, Fenton judged.

Zorn turned to him. "It's past chuck time but you look like you could do with a feed." The tone was friendly but his face was oddly expressionless.

"I could," Fenton answered. "I had to just about pack that hombre in."

Zorn spoke to the other man. "Shorty, tell the cook to rustle a feed. Put these horses in the barn and hunt up Cory. Send him to the house." He turned back to Fenton. "You and I will pack this fellow to the ranchhouse. I'll patch him up while you eat."

The wounded man had said nothing. He was exhausted from the ride and loss of blood. It struck Fenton as strange that Zorn had made no comment on the shooting. But when they had the man on a bunk in the ranchhouse Zorn said, "You're turning him over to the sheriff?"

There was an edge in his voice that rasped Fenton's nerves. "I shore am," he answered bluntly.

Zorn got bandages and iodine from a cabinet. When he came back his manner was more friendly.

"You go along to the mess room and eat," he urged. "I'll look after this fellow and we'll take him to town in a wagon." He was stripping off the man's shirt as he spoke and wasn't looking at Fenton.

Fenton studied the bold, hard-jawed face. Then his eyes turned to the wounded man who, he was sure, had the solution to the mystery of the vanishing cattle. The fellow was powerfully built and once his slight wounds were bandaged he would soon recover strength. Fenton couldn't afford to risk his escape. Zorn looked up and seemed to sense Fenton's reluctance to leave.

"I judge you've got a reason for wanting to get this fellow to the sheriff. I'll watch him while you eat. He ain't hurt much but he's not likely to lick me and run out on you."

There seemed no reason to suspect Zorn of any ulterior purpose. He had shown no indication of having seen this man before. "O. K." Fenton said finally, and went out.

He was near the mess room when a cowboy rode up to the corral, stepped down and tied his horse. He gave Fenton a sharp glance as he passed and went into the ranchhouse. That must be Cory, Fenton thought, the man Zorn had told Shorty to find.

In the mess room something occurred that aroused uneasiness in Fenton; a small thing that a man less familiar with range customs would not have noticed. The cook served him with no show of resentment at having to get an extra meal. "Which shore is unusual," Fenton reflected. "Looks like this old-timer had his orders."

He ate rapidly and was still further surprised when the cook voluntarily brought him more coffee and a piece of pie and sat down on the table to talk to him. It was inconsequential talk, but Fenton had

an idea he was being deliberately delayed.

When he finally got rid of the cook, Fenton left the room without taking time to roll a smoke. Outside he halted, suddenly impressed by the quiet of the place. There was no one in sight and the horse that had been tied to the corral fence was gone.

Hurrying to the ranchhouse, he rapped on the door. There was no answer so he pushed open the door and went in. Walking into the room where they had put the wounded man to bed, he stiffened. The bunk was empty. The wounded man was gone.

SUSPICION flamed in Fenton as he ran from the house and raced for the barn. His first thought was that the stranger had somehow escaped. But where were Zorn, Shorty and Cory? A lift of relief came when he found his own horse in a stall. But the wounded man's horse was gone.

There were no fresh tracks of a horse having gone through the front door of the barn. Running to the rear door, his eyes narrowed at what he saw. A wagon drawn by two horses had pulled away from the barn and there had been a led horse.

Fenton threw the rigging on his horse and rode out along the wheel tracks. Glancing back, he saw that they carefully kept a direction that put the barn between the wagon and the mess room. They held that course, the horses moving at a walk, until they passed beyond a grove of cottonwood trees. There, the trail swung in a wide circle that brought Fenton back to the rear door of the ranchhouse. The wagon had stopped here and then been driven straight out from the house.

Hot with chagrin, Fenton followed the tracks. When they swung south toward the mountains and the signs showed that the team was traveling at a run his suspicions became a certainty. Zorn had tricked him!

The whole thing seemed clear. Zorn was in with the rustlers. From his looks, he would be the leader. The bushwhacker would have told him that Fenton had been in Quartz Gulch. Now Zorn was taking the man back to safety and leaving a plain trail for Fenton to follow. Why?

The answer that occurred to him brought a prickling along his spine. Zorn would have three good reasons for his play. The least might be a desire to rescue his henchman. A stronger reason would certainly be to keep him out of the clutches of the sheriff who might find a way to make him tell the secret of those vanishing cattle. The third reason was what edged Fenton's nerves. Zorn would know that a range detective would make every effort to recapture his man. "And I judge he figures a place that will hide a bunch of cattle so nobody can find 'em will shore hide the body of a dumb range detective," Fenton concluded bitterly.

Suddenly, he remembered the wounded man's revolver and fished it from his saddle pocket. It was a fine ivory-butted .38, an odd gun for an outlaw to be carrying. Set in the ivory was a silver plate with the name Frank Thompson. Fenton shoved the gun back into the saddle pocket.

Then he saw the mouth of the canyon just ahead and he tensed. The tracks led straight into it. There were bushes there and the wagon had been driven straight through them. That Zorn meant to lure him into Quartz Gulch before killing him, Fenton felt sure, but it

wouldn't be smart to count on that.

Swinging his horse off the trail, he dismounted behind some tall bushes and, with a gun in his hand, cautiously moved forward on foot. He came to the wheel tracks and stopped behind a bush while eyes and ears searched for movement or sound.

He had been standing there a full minute when he caught a faint rustling in the bushes beyond him. The sudden conviction struck him that someone was watching him. He could feel eyes upon him and his fingers tightened on his gun butt. Again he heard the sound and his thumb went to the hammer. Then, ten yards ahead of him, a cottontail rabbit hopped from the bushes. It stopped in the trail to scratch one ear and then hopped on into the bushes.

Fenton grinned. "God bless all cottontails," he murmured. "The little feller was tellin' me plain as day that there ain't nobody around." Still he moved forward watchfully. Just beyond where the rabbit had crossed, the bushes ended. Fenton stopped short. Twenty feet from him was the wagon, but the horses were gone.

The reason was plain. The canyon floor ahead was strewn with boulders. Horses could make their way up it but it was impassible for a wagon. Plenty of those boulders were big enough to hide a man but, remembering the rabbit, Fenton moved toward the wagon, moved warily, watching for the first sign of an ambush.

HE reached the wagon and with one final searching glance around, looked into it. The harness was piled in the bed. He leaned over and ran a hand inside a collar pad which was still warm and damp with sweat. The men couldn't be far ahead.

Fenton straightened up and suddenly froze stiff. He was looking into the muzzle of a rifle in the hands of a man who had risen silently from behind a boulder not thirty feet away.

"Just keep standin' still, fellow," the man said coolly, "while Shorty relieves you of that weight in your fist."

He heard sounds behind him and knew that Shorty was close. He was thinking that that pesky rabbit had lied when something crashed down on his skull and he pitched forward into engulfing blackness.

Fenton's first returning sensation was of throbbing agony shot with darting star points that died into total darkness leaving only a pounding in his brain. "Which makes it plumb certain that I ain't entirely dead." He moved a hand over his face and a shock of horror gripped him. Again he passed his hand before his eyes and terror mounted to panic. Only blackness! He was blind!

Frantically pushing himself to a sitting position, his hands felt the cold dampness of solid rock. A murmur of voices reached him, but he could see nothing. He sank back, his eyeballs aching with the effort to pierce the blackness. Blind! Blind!

The voices drew nearer and then the darkness broke as a faint yellowish glow glinted on walls and roof of rock. Footsteps sounded, and two wavering figures appeared, each carrying a lighted candle.

The shock of relief of finding that he could see swept all sense of pain or alarm from Fenton. He lay motionless, eyes closed, weak and sweating, conscious only of the overwhelming joy that he was not blind. The stopping of footsteps pulled his

faculties alert again. Through his closed lids he was aware of the glow of light above him.

"You hit him plenty hard, Shorty," a voice said. "He ain't come to yet."

That, Fenton thought, was the voice he had heard over the leveled rifle, the man Cory, no doubt.

Shorty grunted. "Reckon it'd be all right with Zorn if I'd killed him." He laughed harshly. "It's lucky that winze is deep. With the bodies of a deputy sheriff, a state ranger and a couple of range dicks in it we might have to dump some rock in it to keep 'em from smellin'." And then: "Where th' devil is Zorn? He should 've got here with the other fellow long ago."

There was a sound of shifting feet and Fenton opened his eyes narrowly. It was clear now where he was. He didn't know much about mining but he knew that a winze was some sort of a shaft. He was in one of the old mines in Quartz Gluch. Shorty and Cory were standing at his left, their backs to him, looking down the tunnel. Cory had put his lighted candle in a miner's candlestick on the wall. Shorty was still holding his.

Fenton's eyes went to the guns in their belts. Soundlessly he pushed his body up. Breath locked in his lungs, every nerve tight, he was stealthily reaching for one of Cory's guns when a muffled roar resounded through the tunnel.

Both men stiffened. "What th' devil was that?" Cory muttered.

Fenton's hand licked out and snatched Cory's right gun. The man leaped away, whirled, and his right hand streaked to the empty holster. Then his left darted to his other gun.

Fenton fired. He had one glimpse of Cory falling before the explosion whipped out the candle flames. He rolled sideways in the darkness a second before Shorty's gun thundered. Triggering a shot at the flash, he heard a grunt that ended in a thud.

Whether both men were dead or merely wounded he could not tell in the darkness. He got up cautiously and began to back away. In the closeness of the tunnel the smell of burned powder stung his nostrils and he fought against the inclination to sneeze. His foot turned on a small rock and he bumped into an unseen timber. The jar exploded the repressed sneeze.

Instantly, a gun crashed and a bullet screamed from the roof. Fenton did not return the fire. At most there were four shots left in the gun he had snatched from Cory and probably only three. He edged around the post he had bumped into and stood still.

A light flared as the man who had shot at him lit a candle. It was twenty feet away and Fenton saw Cory's body lying motionless. It must be Shorty who had the candle but he, too, was behind a post.

Edging back to get out of the faint light, Fenton rounded another post and as the darkness deepened, felt his way with one hand on the wall. That hand suddenly slipped into space. Then the sound of running feet made him whirl and he saw a man carrying a lantern running toward him through a lateral drift.

Fenton recognized Blake Zorn. He snapped a shot at the lantern, knew that he had missed, and leaped across the mouth of the drift. There came an answering shot and he turned and ran blindly into the deeper darkness of the tunnel.

Somewhere the tunnel must have an opening. The thought gave him

hope. He was conscious of a lightening of the gloom. A shot roared out and the bullet whistled past him. Zorn was out in the tunnel and it was his lantern that pierced the darkness.

THE smell of powder was behind Fenton now but there was another odor, a familiar one that he had never expected to find underground. *Cattle!* There ws no doubt of it—cattle had been in this tunnel!

There was no time to figure it out. Zorn was pounding after him. The sound ceased abruptly and Fenton swerved toward the wall as gun thunder crashed again. He felt the sear of hot lead as he brought up against the rock wall. Wheeling, he saw that Zorn had set down the lantern and was bringing his gun up with deadly deliberation.

Fenton's gun jumped and roared. He saw Zorn stagger and fired again. The J K manager seemed to lean forward against the impact of the bullet and then pitched full-length and lay still.

Fenton was starting back to get the lantern when he caught a flicker of light coming from behind Zorn. "Shorty!" he muttered, and realized that he had fired his last shot. Turning, he plunged on down the tunnel and brought up hard against a smooth face of rock.

It flashed through his mind that he had run the wrong way. This was the head-wall of the tunnel. The opening must be in the other direction. He was caught, trapped, just as he had the answer to those vanishing cattle.

His eyes searched desperately for some niche in which to hide. There was no break in the walls nor even a post. The man with the candle was coming steadily on but coming slowly, nursing the tiny flame. A wild idea leaped into Fenton's mind. He remembered how the first shots had blown out Shorty's and Cory's candles.

He raced back to where Zorn lay, gave the lantern a kick that sent it crashing into the wall and extinguished the light. Wheeling he ran back toward the end of the tunnel with the fervent hope that Shorty's bullet would miss him and the blast would put out his candle.

No shot came, and he realized with a sinking feeling that Shorty knew he had him trapped. He was coming steadily on, making certain of his victim. Crouched in the angle of the wall, Fenton watched that oncoming light. It paused briefly and glinted on Zorn's dead face. Then it was moving toward him again.

Even while his eyes searched for some hiding place he wondered if it was Shorty or Thompson coming at him. Not that it made any difference which bushwhacker's gun picked him off.

Suddenly, his eyes fastened on a heavy timber near the roof ten feet from the end of the tunnel. The ends of the timber were embedded in the walls and there was space between it and the roof. From the center of it hung a rope, its end about six feet from the floor. The space above the timber offered the only possible hiding place. If he could reach it unseen there was a chance that he could drop on the man, stalking him if he came on this far.

He shot a glance toward the oncoming figure. The man was still some fifty feet away and holding the candle close to his chest to protect the flame. The light would be

shining in his eyes, possibly blinding him to movement this far away.

Fenton stepped quickly to the rope, caught it with both hands, jumped and swung his legs up. For a second they touched the timber. Then, with a surge of panic, he felt himself falling headfirst. There was a squealing sound, a glare of white light and a roar that he thought wildly must be his own head hitting the rock floor. All the strength went out of him. There was a numbness in his brain.

He was barely conscious of a rush of feet and then a face was bending over him. He struck at it feebly and felt his wrist caught firmly.

"Hold it, fellow!" a voice said. "I'm Thompson!"

Fenton's head was clearing. He saw a gun in Thompson's hand and his muscles tightened. "All right, hombre, you've got me. Go ahead and finish the job you started in the canyon."

"I told you I didn't shoot at you," Thompson said sharply. "Somebody was stalking me and when you showed up on the cliff he switched his attention to you." He backed away and sat down heavily with his shoulders against the wall.

FENTON pushed himself up against the opposite wall. Then, with a bound, he was on his feet and staring into the daylight through an opening that a moment before had been solid rock. He leaped into that opening and stopped, wide-eyed with amazement. At his feet was the lake in Quartz Gulch where the cattle signs had ended. He wheeled back to Thompson.

"I get part of this setup, but where do you fit in the game?"

Thompson was pale and exhausted. He frowned and shook his head. "I don't know what you mean. Zorn brought me into this tunnel and said he was going to kill me. He thought I was too weak to escape and left me while he went to get a lantern. I slipped into that cross drift and climbed up a mill hole into a stope. He couldn't come after me because I could throw rocks down on him."

Thompson sucked a deep breath into his lungs and seemed to feel stronger. "There was shooting and Zorn ran out to the tunnel. Then I slipped out of the drift, struck a match and found a dead man. He had a gun and I took it."

"Then it was you shot Shorty?" Fenton asked.

Thompson nodded. "I saw your face when you kicked over the lantern and guessed you must be fighting Zorn. Shorty was about to shoot at you when I killed him."

Some things were becoming clear to Fenton but there was still plenty he didn't understand.

"Why would Zorn want to kill you?" he probed.

"I've no idea," Thompson replied. "I'm head of a mining company that plans to open up these old mines. Yesterday, I happened to be talking to Zorn in Cold Springs and told him why I was here. There was no reason why I shouldn't."

Fenton was twisting a cigarette. He struck a match to light it and the flame was immediately blown out by a steady draft through the tunnel. A frown creased his forehead.

"Say, mister, doesn't there have to be two openings to a tunnel to make a draft?" he demanded.

"Sure. This was the biggest mine in Quartz Gulch. The tunnel was run nearly through the hill. Pos-

sibly the other end has caved in."

Fenton's face lighted. "And you told Zorn you was going to open up these mines! Mister, you signed your own death warrant right then. A mining company comin' in here would have busted Zorn's game wide open."

His eyes lifted to the roof above his head. Completely covering it was a thin slab of rock, its inner edge caught in a hook. "Mister Mining Man, how do you figure that slab got up there? Last time I seen it, it was blocking the mouth of this tunnel."

Thompson looked up and presently pointed to a sheave wheel set in the roof above the timber. A rope ran from the edge of the slab through the wheel and hung down beyond the timber.

"Counter-balance," he explained. "A man pulling on that rope would swing the slab up. The edge would catch in that hook and hold until somebody tripped the hook."

"And me swingin' on that rope opened the tunnel!" Fenton exclaimed.

The whole thing was clear to him now. Blake Zorn had been running stolen cattle through the tunnel and then there was only a twelve-mile drive into Mexico. When the slab was in place it hid the tunnel opening completely. The lake in front of it was deep enough to cover the old waste dump.

Fenton grinned down at Thompson. "Mister, you better forget this mining business. There's money in cattle if they're handled right. This here's the sweetest setup ever I seen. Zorn was robbin' the J K and he would have been plumb safe if I hadn't bumped my head."

"And who are you?" Thompson asked.

"Fenton's the name, just a dumb range detective the J K Company asked the Association to send up here to sift out this rustlin'."

Thompson smiled and held out his hand. "Too bad, I'm vice president of the J K Company," he chuckled.

Fenton's grin widened. "Shucks, I never did have no luck. Looks like I've got to keep on bein' an honest cow detective."

"Unless you want to be foreman of the J K," Thompson said.

Fenton's face lighted. "Suits me fine, but you better block one end of this tunnel. It'd shore be a temptation to an ambitions young feller like me."

THE END.

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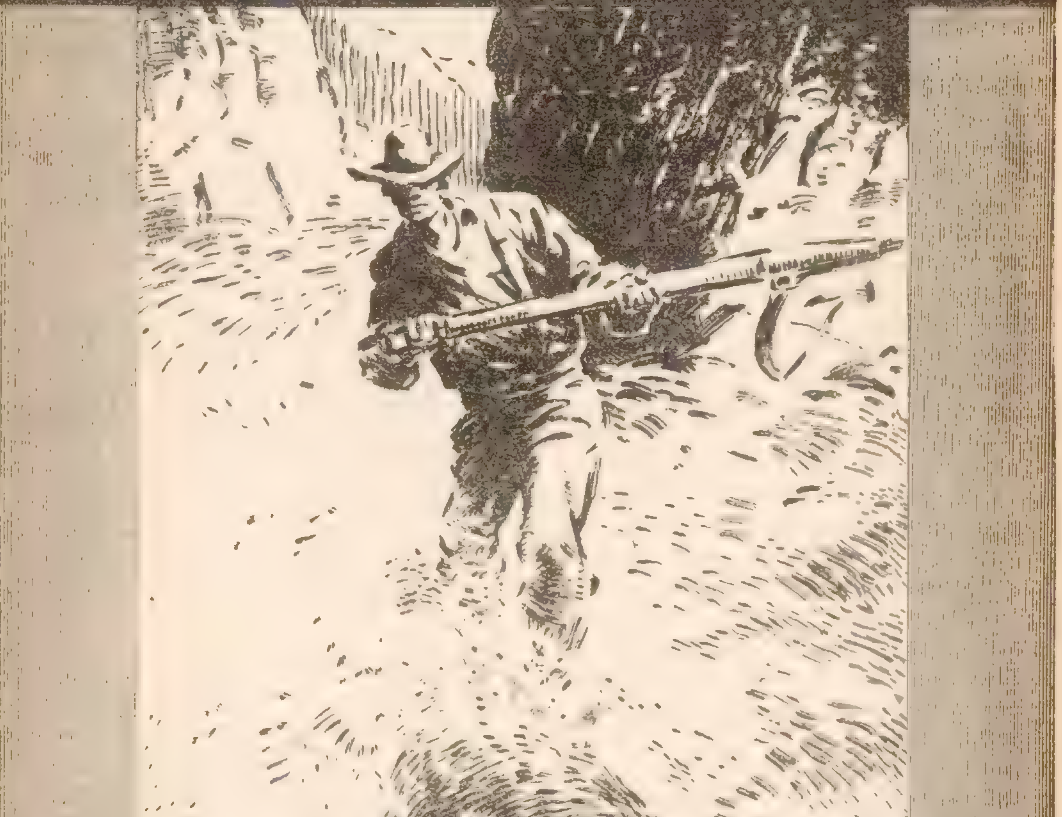


by HOWARD J. PERRY

Death Rides The Hellgate

CHAPTER I

JOB FOR A TOP MAN

THE fat little man behind the battered desk in the employment office removed his metal-rimmed spectacles and let his squinting gaze run over the rangy, lean frame of Tom Drake. Then he hunched forward and pointed the chewed end of a pencil at the younger man.

"It ain't my business to give advice," he said, "so I don't offer it often, but you don't 'pear to be like the rest of the road bums that come in here." He sat back in his chair and laid the pencil down with the air of a judge who is about to issue a solemn decree. "You don't want no job under Slack Malone."

An easy grin formed on Drake's lips, and his smoke-gray eyes twinkled.

"What's the matter with me?"

"There ain't nothing the matter with you," the little man assured him. "Fact is, you look tough enough to hold down any loggin' job." He shook his head. "No, it ain't you, son." He cocked one eye up at Drake. "You're a stranger to these parts, ain't you?"

"Sort of," admitted Drake.

"Well, that explains it. Then you never heard of Slack Malone and his hell-roarin' outfit?"

For an answer Drake merely lifted one heavy eyebrow.

The little man glanced around the room and lowered his voice.

"Slack Malone's running a highball outfit up there in Cedar Valley. What's more, he's runnin' it with a bunch of timber wolves as cussed as he is—and that's going some for pure hellishness. The only men I send up there are two-legged grizzlies who can take it. Some of them don't come back. Slack's gettin' ready to drive. He wants an all-around meat-eatin' catamount to herd his gang, an', son, that's some contract. I ain't got anything against you, an' maybe you need a job, but there ain't goin' to be any blood on my hands. That's why I'm tellin' you. Stick around. There's goin' to be other good jobs."

The warmth slowly died from Drake's eyes as the little man talked. Now he leaned across the desk purposefully.

"Make out the slip. I'm taking that job."

The employment agent's jaw went slack. He started to argue, but his eyes met Drake's. He swallowed hard and reached for a card. When he handed it to Drake he shrugged fatalistically.

"It's your funeral," he said. "Don't blame me for anything that happens."

"I won't," Drake promised as he went out the door.

TWO hours later, when he arrived at the Cedar Valley camp, the last remark of the little fellow in the employment office came back to him with foreboding portent. The very appearance of the outfit gave promise of being any man's funeral—if he happened to be the wrong man.

The weather-eroded buildings were clustered on a flat just above a point where the river slashed its full torrent of white water through a rock-ribbed gorge. Broken and rusted equipment was piled about the camp site.

It was late afternoon, and from a

point upstream came the shrill staccato of the donkey engines as they pitted their power against the big sticks.

From the cookshack came the clatter of pans, and white smoke rose from the lop-angled chimney pipe. A squat figure was busily chopping up logs near the woodpile in the rear, his bald head glistening under the fading rays of a cheerless October sun. As Tom Drake drew near, the man straightened and fixed a curious gaze upon him.

"Everybody in the woods?" Drake asked.

"Won't be long," the other retorted. " 'Bout quittin' time. Lookin' for someone?"

"Yes—Slack Malone."

A pair of cautious eyes traveled over Drake, apparently weighing every detail.

"You sure about that?"

"Of course I am. Why?"

The other moved around the woodpile and nodded for Drake to follow. On the other side, and screened from the cookshack, he paused.

"My name's Peewee Potter. I'm just the bullcook around here."

Drake smiled down at the serious little man. "I'm glad to know you, Peewee. My name's Tom Drake. I'm up here for a job."

Peewee bobbed his head. "Yeah, I guessed as much. That's why—" He paused, and again seemed to be sizing up Drake. Then he humped his shoulders and turned toward the cookshack. "Aw, hell!" he muttered. "I should stick my neck out. Slack'll be along in a minute. You can wait for him."

"Hey, hold on!" Drake called. "Come back here! You had something on your tongue. Why'd you change your mind?"

Peewee came back reluctantly. He pointed to a cauliflower ear. "I got that from Slack once for speakin' outa turn."

Drake nodded understandingly. "But he isn't going to hear you this time. C'mon, get it off your chest!"

"I wouldn't say anything 'cept I was thinkin' of another clean-lookin' guy like you who came up here. He thought he could work for Slack."

"His name wasn't Joe Dawson, was it?" Drake's voice was strangely flat.

Peewee looked at him sharply. "How'd you know?"

"I just played a hunch. What became of him?"

Peewee jerked his head toward the high-walled gorge. "The Hellgate didn't get its name for nothin'. Slack didn't like Dawson. Sent him through the Hellgate on the nose of a drive."

"And Joe never came back?" Drake said slowly.

Peewee nodded. It was a full minute before he spoke. "Yeah," he said finally, "but sometimes I don't blame Slack altogether. If that bunch o' pencil-pushin' lambs up North who own the timber would only come down here an' see the way things are run, it might be different. But they don't. Slack works on a contract. He can kill men to make money, but they don't care up there."

"I see," Drake said, his eyes on the far-off peaks that had caught the last rays of the setting sun.

"I'm only tellin' you this," Peewee went on, "because I can see you ain't the kind to get along with Slack. You still got time to get out before—"

His jaw suddenly went slack, and his gaze shot past Drake. The next moment he had whirled and was filling his arms with stovewood.

DRAKE had heard the step behind him, and now he turned to face a man of grizzly proportions whose thick features were covered with a heavy stubble of black beard, and sliced by a white scar that ran from the corner of his eye to a point below his ear.

"We don't feed boomers up here," the newcomer announced, glaring at Drake. "Get going!"

Drake matched his glare with a twist of his mouth that could have been taken for a smile. From his pocket he drew the employment slip and held it out to the other.

"I'm not bumming, Malone," he said quietly.

Slack jerked the slip of paper out of his hand and jammed it in his pocket with scarcely a glance. His gaze switched back to Drake, and the white scar took on a livid glow.

"It's a helluva situation when you ask an employment office for a good logger and they send you a punk. What do you think you can do?"

Drake didn't answer at once. So this was the mighty Slack Malone, top-notch killer of men and contracts. Something warned him that he was facing a man who could back up any bluff.

"You asked for a top man. They sent me up, so why not give me a chance?" Drake spoke easily, but apparently this wasn't what Slack expected. Drake quickly decided that the big logger expected men to wilt under his ugly manner.

Malone's lip curled. "So you think you're a top man—good enough to match my bunch, eh?"

"All I asked was a chance," Drake answered. By this time the men had arrived from the woods and, sensing the situation, they gathered around. A motley crew, chosen by Slack more for their brawn than for any other possible virtues.

"I heard you," Slack retorted. He turned to the group. "This punk thinks he's a logger, men. I ain't agreed with him yet, but I guess we can soon find out."

The men nodded their heads in approval. In the back of the crowd, Drake caught sight of Peewee. The bullcook's face was grave and apprehensive.

The logging boss had taken the slip of paper from his pocket. "So your name is Drake, eh? And you're a big-shot logger. Well, c'mon."

He spun around and started for the river's edge. The men trailed after him. Drake started to follow when something plucked at his sleeve. He looked down into the worried face of Peewee.

"Why don't you call it quits, son?" the bullcook urged. "You handled him wrong. He's goin' to get you."

"Like he got Joe Dawson?" Drake's words were brittle.

Peewee nodded.

"Let him try," Drake snapped as he started after the others.

A couple of the men were already out on the boom that held back several thousand giant logs. With their peaveys they worked a small fir loose from the others and snaked it through the boom ends.

Drake glanced down the river. A hundred yards below the boom it narrowed to half its width and began boiling. In another hundred yards it was whipped to a fury, driving with full force against the near side of the rock buttress that formed the Hellgate.

Slack was eying him contemptuously. "All right, big shot! Take her through!"

Again Drake looked at the white water, and then his gaze came back to Slack. There was a faint grin on the big logger's lips.

"And if I do," said Drake, "is the job mine?"

Again Slack almost laughed. "You ain't through yet," he retorted. "Come out on the other side of the Hellgate ridin' her an' I'll take you on."

CHAPTER II

A NARROW ESCAPE

DRAKE kicked the mud from between the calks on his boots and walked out on the boom. One look at the barked fir told him that they must have been saving it for just such a murder. As he stepped on it, one of the men held out his peavey to him.

Drake looked toward Slack Malone. "Where I come from," he said loud enough for the big logger to hear, "we ride 'em bare-handed." Then he turned to the men beside him. "Kick her loose, then go up there and tell the cooky that river hogs eat meat, and lots of it."

He had barely finished speaking before the small log caught the current and started down the river. A good riverman can do amazing things with a log in heavy going, but Tom Drake knew he would have to dig deep into his bag of tricks to come out of this alive.

Before the log struck the heart of the current, he spun it a few times to center his weight. He worked his way forward to keep the nose deep, then he set his calks just as the log lurched ahead under the full impact of the water.

In another moment he was bucking the foaming water, and with every toss the log threatened to rip out of control. It was one thing to ride white water with a thousand logs and quite another to take one slender fir through a raging torrent like this.

Ahead the high granite walls of the Hellgate reared up and came at him. He could see the white spume where the full force of the current struck the massive rock, and he was heading dead onto that spot. If he hit it on the nose, Slack Malone would be looking for another man.

Now the log struck the cross-currents and went into a whirling-dervish dance. Drake forgot the death sentence ahead in an effort to keep atop the log. One moment he was beating a tattoo with his sharp-shod boots, the next he brought it up sharp with a quick snub that threatened to pitch him into the raging flood.

Then, suddenly, the log straightened out and shot for the granite wall with the speed of a torpedo. Drake back-stepped and the front end reared up. Only about a hundred feet more before it would crash. Frantically Drake fought to spin the log into a sideswipe. It was the one chance in a thousand. Catching the down pitch of the log, he hurled his weight forward, at the same moment throwing his full strength into a quick spin. Twice his calks tore loose, but he managed to regain his balance. Twenty feet from the rock, the big log began to swing. Crouching low, Drake poised, ready to leap.

With a splitting crash, the log struck the slippery rock a glancing blow and reared like a bucking bronco. At the same moment Drake leaped high, and as the fir settled again and slid off the wall, his feet struck. Flailing his arms like a windmill, he fought to regain his equilibrium. For one terrifying instant the log threatened to surge from under him. Then it lunged ahead under the impact of the water.

Drake snubbed the roll and straightened. The glistening shoulder of the Hellgate flashed past him. He was in the clear. He had almost

ridden to hell on a toothpick.

A hundred yards below the gorge the log struck the widened river. Drake leaped into the water to his armpits and waded ashore.

Halfway back to camp on the river trail he met Peewee Potter. The little bullcook bared a toothless grin.

"Son, that was a bearcat ride! I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it!"

"I had to get that job, Peewee," Drake said earnestly.

The bullcook's face clouded. "You still got time to change your mind. Take my advice and turn around. You've showed Slack up and he'll hate you. You won't have a chance with him feelin' that way."

Drake looked at the river. "I played leapfrog with death out there for a job. Luck rode my tail feathers, and it ought to hold. I'm sticking, Peewee."

When they arrived back in camp, Slack Malone was not around. The men had finished eating and had gathered in the bunkhouses for the nightly session of poker.

Drake was about to pass up the cookshack, thinking he was too late, when a voice hailed him from the kitchen window.

"Hey, you boomer! I ain't runnin' no short-order house, but you can have the pig scraps if you come an' get 'em."

Drake looked up to see a twinkle in the eyes of the speaker that took the sting from the words. Inside the dinner shack the cook was setting down a heavy platter of meat at the end of the bare table.

"Up at the Big House they feed 'em well before the hangin'," he muttered as he passed Drake. "I believe in doin' it afterward—if the victim lives. You sure got guts, kid, an' I wish you luck if there is any up here."

He disappeared in the kitchen, and the next moment Drake heard him growling loudly that he'd take the next man that came in late for a meal and carve him into little pieces. Apparently not all of Slack's men were wholly satisfied, Drake pondered.

However, the next morning it was quite apparent from the manner in which he was ignored that the crew wasn't willing to take him in.

Slack appeared just as they were leaving for the woods. He looked at Drake through slitted eyes for a moment and then jerked his thumb in the upriver direction.

"Go on up there and set chokers, Drake. An' in case you don't know it, we're highballin' the hell outa this camp."

One of the buckers casually fell in step beside Drake as he went up the trail. They walked along in silence for a few moments before the bucker spoke out of the corner of his mouth.

"Moose Olson is bullin' the woods crew. Look out for him. He's bad medicine.

Then he quickened his pace and left Drake behind.

THERE was no doubt in Drake's mind after he had been in the woods thirty minutes that Slack Malone was highballing his outfit. Speed, and speed alone, counted. The fallers worked with the staccato tempo of machine guns, and the buckers were on the stricken firs before the echo of their fall had died away against the distant peaks. Donkey engines shrieked and trembled as the giant drums bit at the cables. Logs reared up and crashed through the underbrush. It was all a man could manage to do his work and keep from being killed.

Drake had been working for more than an hour in knee-deep muck before he saw Moose Olson. He recognized the woods boss from his size and the way the men leaped at their work under his lashing tongue. It was some time before he came near Drake.

The choker setters were working on a hillside, and as the cables yanked at the logs, they would sashay crazily down the slope. One big fir had started down and then buried its nose into the dirt, snapping the cable.

Grabbing another choker, Drake had just worked it under the other end of the log and was calling for the hook when Olson appeared on the grade above him.

"All right, all right, boomer!" Olson jeered. "When you're through playin' around down there I'll send a couple of good loggers to show you how it's done."

Drake glanced up and rubbed the mud from his eyes. Moose Olson was even larger than Slack, and greater power was revealed in his long arms and thick shoulders. His flat nose and calk-pitted face testified that he wasn't a man to dodge a fight.

Drake bent his head again without answering. The choker had been set and he stepped back and signaled for slow speed to see if it would hold before the heavy pull was ordered.

Instead of coming up easily, the line tautened with a jerk. The next instant the big log reared up and spun around. Drake saw the fir leap at him. In a flash he realized that he was trapped. In a split second the life would be crushed out of him. To get out of the way was impossible. There was only one chance, and it was a gamble. As the big log plunged at him, one end was about three feet above the ground. Drake dove forward, flattening himself in the muck. The rough bark of the descending log brushed his hat off as he fell.

There was a strange silence when he pulled himself out of the mud. The chattering donkey engine had stopped. The woods crew had quit work, every man watching him with fascinated curiosity.

Wiping the mud from his hands, Drake glanced in the direction of Moose Olson. The tobacco-stained teeth of the woods boss were bared in a wide grin. Now Drake knew the reason for the miscued signal. Olson had ordered full speed. Cold-blooded murder couldn't have been more intentional.

Anger burst to a white flame within him. If this was the kind of game that Slack Malone wanted to play, he'd play it with him. Olson wanted a fight, wanted to whip him in front of all the men because Slack had ordered it. There was no doubt about that in Drake's mind. Well, Olson could have it.

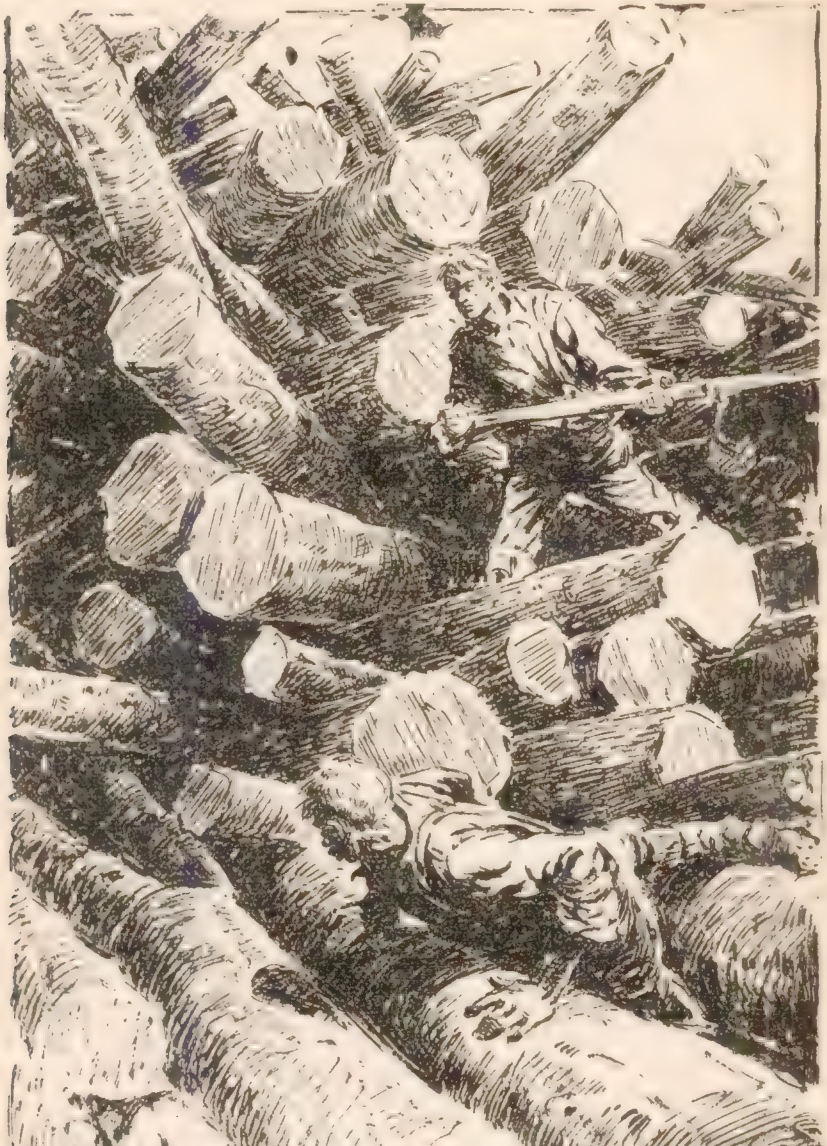
In a few quick strides he was halfway up the slope where Moose waited. Sensing what was about to happen, the men edged in closer.

Suddenly Drake stopped. The first flush of anger cooled and he realized he was acting more from anger than from common sense. A fight now would gain him nothing, no matter whether he won or lost. There were higher stakes, and Moose Olson didn't sit in on that game.

Again he glanced up at the big woods boss. This time he essayed a grin.

"I thought you said you were highballin' this outfit, Olson," he called. "Since when has a highball gang stopped work to watch a mucker dodge a log?"

As if there had been a command



Slack went down and got caught in the maelstrom of bucking timber.

in his words, the men turned away. Olson's smile faded.

"All right, what're you waitin' for?" he snapped. "Let's get loggin'."

THE tension had been broken, but Drake knew that the men were disappointed. In their eyes he had proven himself yellow. They would have admired him more if he had gone down fighting the brawny woods boss.

He had further proof of the men's attitude that night in camp. Where he had felt a hint of friendliness in the morning, it was entirely absent now.

After supper Drake took a walk down by the river. In a few minutes he heard someone come out of the woods back of him. He turned and waited. When the other was a few paces away Drake saw that it was the bullcook.

"Thought I saw you wander off down here," Peewee greeted him. "Mind my company?"

Drake shook his head. "No, Peewee. But I hardly expected any company at all."

Peewee made a wry face. "You sure stepped outa line today, didn't you?"

"I guess so," Drake admitted. "Maybe I should have fought Moose."

Peewee scratched his ear. "You sure was on the spot. Wouldn't been so bad if the boys hadn't sorta counted on you."

Drake turned a puzzled look on the little fellow. "Counted on me?"

"Yeah. After yesterday on the river they figgered maybe you had what it takes."

"And now they think I'm yellow?"

"Uh-huh. Ain't we all a bunch of damned fools? Just because a man uses his head 'stead of his mitts, we don't like him." Then he grinned. "That don't include me. I'm glad you didn't tangle with Moose. He'd 'a' killed you—which is just what Slack wanted. You know that now, don't you?"

"Well, I've a good hunch along that line," Drake said dryly.

Peewee looked out across the river where a nighthawk wheeled through the heavy dusk. "You know," he said soberly, "I'd take a run-out tonight if I were you. You ain't got a chance. What's the use of being pigheaded?"

"Listen, Peewee," said Drake, "this outfit's haywire, isn't it?"

"Yeah. So what?"

"Everybody loses here except Slack Malone. Even the owners lose, but they don't know it. That right?"

"Sure," Peewee admitted. "But what are you going to do about it? Stayin' here and gettin' your neck broken ain't goin' to help matters. If those softies down in Seattle had any sense they'd look into matters. But they won't. They don't give a damn about the poor stiffs working for them. All they want is the money. And Slack gets it for them."

"I wonder," said Drake absently.

"You wonder what?" Peewee inquired impatiently.

"Oh, I was just thinking," said Drake. "Fact is, I was wondering when Slack was going to drive?"

"Any time now, but what do you care?" Peewee came closer. "Listen, kid, I'm old enough to be your pa, and I'm givin' you some advice. Why be so stubborn? Get smart and clear out!"

"And forget about all the poor devils Slack has murdered?" Drake blared. "Especially Joe Dawson?"

Peewee's face puckered with perplexity. "What's Joe Dawson to you, or any of the rest?"

Drake didn't answer for a moment.

Then he spoke slowly.

"Peewee, my dad was a timberman, and his dad before him. My granddad mucked logs behind a yoke of oxen, slept on boards and ate nothing but sowbelly. Things have changed since then, haven't they?"

"Yeah, a little," Peewee said cynically.

"Well, things are going to keep on changing. The day isn't far off when men like Slack and Moose won't be wanted in the woods. When human life and health will come first, not last."

"When that time comes, preachin' men won't have a job, 'cause we'll have heaven right here." Peewee shook his head sadly. "No, son, it can't come. No use your dreamin'."

"Peewee, I'm not dreaming. The only men who are dreaming are fellows like Joe Dawson, dreaming somewhere down there in the river, their bones rotting in the river bottom." Seeing the odd look in the bullcook's eyes, he grinned and said, "You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

Peewee shook his head. "Not crazy, son, just a little cracked. But dammit, I wish you were right."

"Maybe I am."

"Nuts!" Peewee grunted. "C'mon, let's hit the hay. I've talked my last. You're goin' in with both eyes open."

"You're damn right I am," Drake retorted. "And going strong, until someone stops me."

"They likely will," Peewee flung over his shoulder as he started back to camp.

CHAPTER III

A CLASH WITH MOOSE

FOR the next week, however, Drake was ignored not only by the men, but by Slack and Moose. The woods boss drove the men hard, but he never singled out Drake. Malone remained away from the woods and seldom appeared at camp.

Then, on Saturday, word was passed that the drive would start Monday morning. The water was high and the largest boom of logs ever to take the river was clogging the stream for a quarter of a mile.

Sunday morning, while the men were eating breakfast, Slack Malone appeared.

"Listen, you men!" he said from the doorway. "I just got word from headquarters that we've got to have those logs at tidewater by midnight tomorrow. There's a contract at stake, and if we don't get down on time the Black River outfit will get the order. That means we've got to tear our guts out. It's up to you. But I'll make it a business proposition. If we make it, there's a ten-dollar bonus for every man."

Slack paused, studying the faces turned toward him. Then, when the men nodded, he turned and left the shack.

"That's just another way of sayin' he's goin' to take ten bucks' worth outa our hides," one of the men remarked cynically.

"Yeah," the man next to him grunted. "Wonder if he'll pay the funeral expenses of those that don't get through."

Drake got up and left the shack. He was smiling to himself when Peewee approached.

"Hell's goin' to pop loose tomorrow," the bullcook muttered.

"So I understand, Peewee," Drake answered. "You going to handle the chow?"

Peewee looked at him sourly. "You don't eat when you drive under Slack," he grunted. "An' some don't eat afterward. You see, son, things ain't changed much since the old days, an' they won't."

"You wait and see if they don't

change," Drake laughed. "I'm going down and look the river over. If anyone asks, you haven't seen me."

But before he got to the river's edge he noticed two strangers enter Slack's bunkhouse. Something in the appearance of one of them made him change his mind about going farther. Instead he took up a position in a clump of scrub fir where he could watch the bunkhouse.

It was almost an hour later when the two men came out, accompanied by Slack. The three started down the river trail toward town. Drake waited until they had been gone about fifteen minutes. Then he slipped into the timber and followed.

HARBOR CITY was a typical logging town. A cheap hotel, a few stores and several saloons clustered together at the mouth of the river. Drake went to the post office first. There was a large envelope for him, and when he read the contents the lines about his mouth tightened.

Stuffing the letter in his pocket, he went to the nearest saloon. As he entered he made a quick survey of the room. A group of men were playing cards in the corner. There was no one at the bar. The bartender was bending over a copy of a sporting paper. He looked up as Drake approached.

"What'll you have, logger?" he asked.

"Nothing to drink," said Drake. "But I'm looking for Slack Malone. I'm one of his men. Do you know where he hangs out when he's in town?"

"He don't patronize me," the other retorted. "And his men don't, either. He makes 'em go to the Imperial. You'll find him there, if he's in town."

"Thanks," said Drake. "I'm new in the camp."

"Yeah, I could tell that," the bartender grunted, and returned to his reading.

The Imperial was just another ramshackle building. As Drake came near he could hear the raucous voices of loggers. It was apparent that this saloon had most of the Sunday trade.

Outside, he paused and peered over the swinging doors. There were at least two dozen men in the smoke-filled room. Some lounged at the bar, while others were at tables, playing.

Neither Slack nor the men he had left the camp with were in evidence. Making sure of this, Drake entered and ordered a drink. When the bartender set it down on the bar, Drake leaned toward him.

"You know a fellow by the name of Slack Malone?"

The bartender looked him over and wiped the mahogany a couple of times before he answered.

"Yeah, what of it?" he said finally.

Drake shrugged. "Nothing much. Thought I might get on. Understand he's going to drive."

"You might," the other replied, "but you can't see him. He's busy."

Drake's face took on a look of puzzlement. "How do you know he's busy?"

"How do I know?" the other snapped. "Because he owns this place, and right now he's back there talkin' business." He jerked his thumb toward a door in the rear.

"Oh," said Drake. "Well, I'll just hang around."

"You'll likely have a long wait. But you can stick as long as you've got money."

Drake pulled a bill from his pocket. "Guess I can qualify."

When the bartender returned with

his change he looked at the untouched glass.

"Not at the rate you're lappin' it up," he growled.

Drake grinned. "I like to let it age."

When the bartender turned away, Drake poured the drink into the bar gutter and sauntered over to one of the card tables. Appearing to watch the game, he studied the rear door. It was apparent that it led into a room attached to the main building.

A few minutes later he strolled out into the street. The usual Sunday quiet lay over the town. There were only a few people about, and Drake waited until the street was momentarily deserted. Then he slipped into the alley beside the saloon. In the rear he discovered that his surmise had been correct, and that there was a room attached to the building. Adjoining it was a lean-to shed.

Making his way into the shed, he heard voices coming through the thin board wall. He recognized Slack's harsh tones, but it was not until he moved up close and pressed his ear against the door that he could make out the conversation.

"Listen, you fellows," Slack was saying. "Moose can handle dynamite like the best powder monkey who ever drew a breath. He could kick the whole of Hellgate into the river with a six-ounce shot if he had to."

"Just see that he does," a voice retorted. "An' see that you cover up."

"I'll cover up, don't worry," Slack boasted. "I've got just the sucker up there. A new boomer who runs to the yellow."

"Then I guess we'd better take the air," a third voice remarked. "Your cash will be waiting for you."

"It better be," said Slack. "That's a detail it ain't healthy to overlook. C'mon an' I'll buy you a drink."

Drake slipped back into the alley. Waiting until no one was in sight, he slouched across the street. Once out of possible sight, he quickened his pace until he was well on the way back to camp.

Luck had played into his hands. A few moments later and he would have missed this choice bit of information. There was no doubt in his mind now that the two visitors at camp that morning were from the Black River outfit. The only part of the whole thing that really surprised him was the part he was scheduled to play. So that was why Slack and Moose had laid off him! They were priming him to hold the sack in a crooked deal!

BACK at the Hellgate, it was quite apparent what Slack intended to do. There was an overhanging rock at the top of the cliff. By blasting this into the river he could jam the logs tighter than the hubs of hell.

Drake went on into camp. If Moose was going to set any dynamite, he would certainly wait until evening, when there was less chance of being seen.

At supper time the woods boss was missing, and Drake ate hurriedly, leaving before the others were finished. Circling through the woods, he climbed up the slope and approached the top of Hellgate from the rear. It was not until he was within fifty yards of the top that he could command a view of the place.

The sun had disappeared in the west and night was starting to close in. Drake looked around, seeking a place where he could get under cover and wait. He spotted a low clump of cedars and was halfway to it when he heard a twig break behind him.

Spinning around, he found himself face to face with Moose Olson. There was a sneering, contemptuous look on the big logger's face.

"Now ain't this pleasant!" Olson said gloatingly. "Well, boomer, this time I got you right where I want you." His fingers closed slowly, the muscles of the forearms swelling. "You ain't got a chance now to show yellow." He edged closer.

Drake watched him calmly. Then, with a quick movement, he stripped off his Mackinaw.

"Well," he said crisply, "what are you waiting for?"

His words brought a look of surprise to Olson's eyes. There was a quick shift in his gaze, as if he half expected someone to come to Drake's aid.

"Mighty big talk when you're alone," he sneered. Again he advanced.

Drake backed up, seeking more level ground. He knew Olson's method of fighting, and the rules weren't in the book. The only chance he would have against the woods boss would be to keep his feet. One misstep and he would never get up again.

Moose was crouching low now, his fists hanging like huge hams at his sides. Then, with the springlike agility of a catamount, he leaped. While he was still in midair, his fists lashed out. But he had made the mistake of thinking that Drake would back up. Instead the younger man stepped forward and slightly to one side. With a hooking left he caught Moose flush on the point of the jaw.

The impact of the blow clacked Olson's teeth like castanets and he came down hard on his heels. A punch like that would have felled any ordinary man, but Moose Olson had not gained the reputation of being the camp's best fighter for nothing.

With a snarl of rage he leaped again. This time Drake stepped back, and his right came up with the same pistonlike drive as the other. He had put everything into those two blows, and now that Olson scarcely lost his balance a premonition came to Drake that this was going to be a fight indeed.

Moose was at him again, and this time one of his great fists caught Drake on the shoulder. The force of it almost sent him sprawling. He managed to duck the next few swings and bring his own fists up, but it was like hammering on a stone wall. Olson merely blinked and came on.

Already Drake was gasping for breath. He moved in circles, stabbing lefts and rights into the big man's face. In a few moments the big fellow's features were smeared with blood, but his powerful arms never ceased flailing out at Drake. His breath whistled through his teeth each time he lunged.

But if Drake showed the strain less, he was feeling it more. Whenever Olson managed to hit him the blow was almost paralyzing. And the big fellow kept crowding in. Once Drake slipped and dropped to his knee. The light that flared in Moose's eyes told him that the big fellow was hoping for just such a chance. But Drake was up again before Olson could get to him.

Every time Moose snorted and charged, Drake whipped his fists to that blood-smeared face. The effect was like a bee stinging an angry bull. Olson only lashed more viciously. The big fellow seemed utterly tireless.

Suddenly Olson dropped his arms and dove like a football player. Drake leaped backward and his foot

caught. The next moment he was flat on his back. In that split second he saw the light of the killer in Moose's eyes as the big man reared up and one calked boot came down.

Drake realized he could never escape it. Instead he swung his open palm at it. The blow diverted the boot and Moose lost his balance. Before he could regain it, Drake was on his feet.

As they faced each other again, both men were gasping for breath. For the briefest moment they paused, then Moose charged again. He wasn't bothering to hit Drake now. All he wanted was to get his hands on him.

Drake retreated, never ceasing the tattoo he was beating on the other's face. But he knew that unless he could score some desperate coup Moose would soon get hold of him, and that would be the end.

Easing up on his blows and gathering every ounce of energy, Drake backed away faster. At the same time he began to breathe heavily, and his legs began to sag.

Sensing a kill, Moose threw all caution aside. He charged in, both hands wide to encircle Drake's waist. As he did so, Drake stopped short and braced himself. Then, with every bit of his remaining strength, he swung first his left and then his right.

Moose was caught unprepared. He was leaning forward, his jaw was sagging open. The force of Drake's blows twisted his head half way around. For an instant he stood, awkwardly poised, his eyes glassy. Then he pitched forward on his face, his arms spread-eagled, his body quivering.

Drake stared at the prone figure, unable to believe that he had won in that last desperate surge. He sucked the cool air into his strained lungs and started to turn away when there came a quick rushing movement behind him. Half turning, he saw Slack Malone upon him, one arm raised. Then something crashed on his head. There was a bright flash in his brain and then blankness.

CHAPTER IV

SHOWDOWN IN THE HELLGATE

DISTANT VOICES faded and swelled in Tom Drake's ears and a dim reddish light hung over his bleary eyes. He felt as if he were weighted down by a two-ton weight. He lay for a long time watching the crimson glow before he realized he was staring up into the morning sky. The voices came again from far away and now he made them out to be the shouts of men.

Slowly he turned his head and memory began to drift back into his pounding brain. Had Moose licked him? No, he remembered Moose senseless on his face in the dirt. What had happened then? Slack Malone! Slack had clubbed him down.

He lifted one hand and his fingers came in contact with blood-clotted hair. Now things were becoming more clear to him. It was early morning and those shouts must be coming from the river hogs as they began the drive.

Suddenly he remembered. The thought sent strength through his aching muscles and he pulled himself up. Had Moose succeeded in blocking the river? Once on his feet, he swayed dizzily, but felt the circulation flowing through his strained and cold-cramped muscles.

His gaze fell on the upper sweep of the river where the streamers of morning mist were being scattered by the wind.

From bank to bank the bosom of the river heaved with logs. Already

the advance logs were catching the full force of the current and were starting down stream. At the rear, the river men were scattered across the boom, breaking loose small log tangles.

Drake turned quickly and glanced toward the huge rock on the Hellgate. It was still there, silhouetted against the morning sky. Perhaps Slack had weakened after all. Yet he had had a good chance to make Drake the goat. If he had blown that rock, he could easily have placed the blame.

Then, as Drake stared at the rock, it suddenly reared up as if struck by some invisible gargantuan hand. At the same instant a mighty roar filled the morning air. Drake was almost knocked from his feet by the shock. There came a deep rumble as the tons of rock and earth shot downward.

One fleeting look at the log-choked river and Drake knew that Slack had timed everything to the minute. A thousand logs were leaping downstream. It wouldn't be long now before they would be piling up in a tangled mass. In another moment he was racing down the slope.

At the bottom he paused. The first logs were just swinging into the Hellgate where the water now foamed and surged about an island of rock. As he looked a big fir struck head on, churned in the water and then rolled off and went on downstream. But others were coming too fast. They wouldn't all go that way. Sooner or later they would start jamming and once they did, the Hellgate would be clogged from bank to bank.

By this time the river crew had become aware of the catastrophe. They left their work and rushed in the direction of the gorge. Every man knew what would happen if the jam got set.

They passed below Drake with Slack Malone in the lead. Malone was yelling to his men and cursing loudly.

"C'mon, you river hogs! Let's get in there and break her up before she ties herself in a knot!"

Slack was putting on a good act and the men hurried to carry out his orders. Drake looked for Moose, but the woods boss was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps the beating he got was too much for him.

Out on the river the full force of the drive was sweeping by. Already logs were piling up against the big rock. Every moment more piled on from the rear. It would only be a matter of moments before there would be a thousand logs in that jam.

Drake ran down and joined the men. They were so intent on watching the jam form that they were not aware of his presence.

"It looks like we're licked, men!" Slack's voice rose above the roar of the river. "She's setting in!"

Drake grabbed a peavey from the man beside him.

"Like hell, we're licked," he cried. "I'll crack her or I'll go down too!"

Before anyone realized what he had in mind he had leaped out on heaving log mass.

"Stop him!" someone yelled. "He's gone nuts!"

But Drake was already halfway to the jam. The great logs spun under his feet, as he leaped from one to another. If he could get at that key log before it became too tightly wedged, he might have a chance.

THE jam had spread now until it measured a hundred feet across. One look at the tangled mass against the rock and he realized the odds were stacked

against him. There was one big fir angled in such a fashion that it held back all the others.

Drave drove his peavey into it and threw his weight against it. It gave way, slid forward and stopped. Once more he heaved upon it. Again it moved and this time the force of the logs swung it around and it rolled free. Instantly the whole jam started forward, but for only an instant. Then another log lodged at a crazy angle and the mass started to pile up again.

Drake was about to attack it when there was a shout close by. He turned to see Slack Malone charging across the jam at him.

"Get outa there, you damn boomer!" the logger raged. "I'm running this drive, and running it the way I want to."

For answer Drake threw his peevee into the balky log and hurled his full strength on it. The big stick was balanced in such a way that it reared up and dove forward, carrying with it the full head of the drive.

Drake leaped backward and narrowly escaped being swept into the pounding river. The log mass moved forward now and began to gain impetus. If the speed kept up, the logs would soon be going too fast to tie up again.

Suddenly Drake heard a wild shout from the men on the river bank.

Keeping his eyes riveted on the big rock and at the same time dancing from one pitching log to another, Drake had forgotten Slack for the moment. Then something swished by his head. He looked around to see Slack start to swing his peavey again.

"You're going to hell with this drive, boomer," Slack gritted. "An' goin' damn soon!"

But at that moment the whole jam seemed to surge up from beneath the logger. The peavey slipped from his hands. For a second he fought to get his balance, and then he went down in the whirling mass.

Drake had also lost his balance, but he was on his feet again. He was in the center of a bucking maelstrom of timber, and it was all he could do for a full minute to keep from being crushed under it. When he finally got clear he looked around for Slack. A wild cry drew his attention to a point below the big rock. There, in a cluster of angled logs, the logger was waving his arms frantically. One of his legs was wedged tightly between two big firs. His face was contorted in anguish.

Over his shoulder Drake measured the drive. In a few moments now it would be a churning fury. No man's life would be worth a cent out there.

Again Slack screamed, a note of stark fear in his voice. The logs, holding his leg in their viselike grip, had scissored together.

Drake swore under his breath and leaped forward. He knifed his peavey in between the timber.

"Malone," he yelled as he put his weight on the handle, "I ought to let you stay here . . . let you go down the river like you did Joe Dawson. But I guess I'm yellow, after all. I can't stand by and see even a polecat suffer."

The two logs moved a few inches. Malone had quit yelling, but he had turned white under the torturing pain.

"But this is your end, Malone!" Drake yelled. "Even if you do get out of here you won't walk like a man again. But you ought to live.

Continued on page 115

Famous Lost Mines

THE LOST BREYFOGLE

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

THEY say that up in Austin, Nevada you can still see gold-flecked samples of the incredibly rich quartz ore that came from the lost Breyfogle mine. At any rate the ore was on display there for many years.

That's point one in helping to establish the undoubted authenticity of the million-dollar gold discovery Louis Jacob Breyfogle made somewhere in a desolate range of desert mountains along, or near the eastern edge of Death Valley.

Point two: Much of that general terrain is known to be highly mineralized. Other gold mines, and good ones at that, have been found there. Moreover Breyfogle had a legitimate reason for losing his amazing find, a reason that made it imposible for him to return to the bonanza although he made many heartbreaking attemps to do so.

But that's getting ahead of a story which properly begins back about 1865. Some say '63. Others even a year or two later than '65. The exact date doesn't matter. The mine itself is the important thing.

At any rate in the spring of whatever year you wish in the middle 1860s a big, bearded prospector, a veritable giant of a man stopped for an evening's *posada* at the Vegas ranch on the present site of Las Vegas, Nevada. He said he had come from Austin and was heading towards Death Valley in search of gold.

Mrs. Stewart, owner of the ranch at the time, was glad to put the stranger up for the night. She wished him luck when he left in the morning, and it is important to remember in the light of what happened later that in the course of Breyfogle's casual parting conversation he declared that he very likely would try the mountains *"to the south"* before striking over to-

ward Death Valley itself.

Not very long afterwards, perhaps two weeks later, Mrs. Stewart, standing in the ranch house door saw what appeared to be the bent form of a man, a slowly moving black blob in the desert glare, dragging himself toward the ranch. She rode out with one of the hands to investigate.

It was Breyfogle, bruised and broken, his shaggy head a matted mass of blood and hair. His pain-dazed face was blank and expressionless.

When the shocked ranch folk tried to get Breyfogle on a horse they had difficulty because the half-dead prospector would not unclench his fists to give up the heavy pieces of rock he was carrying in his outstretched hands. To all questions as to what had happened he made no reply. He kept repeating to himself the single magic word, "Gold," while his eyes, red-rimmed and bloodshot remained fixed on the precious quartz samples in his grasp.

He was taken back to the Vegas ranch and put to bed with his rock samples besides him on the pillow. For a time it was touch and go whether he would recover. His skull had been fractured by a blunt intrument, his body beaten unmercifully.

BUT it is hard to kill a prospector. Eventually strength returned to Breyfogle's huge frame, and with it some measure of mental coherence. Though his brain never quite recovered, he could when he made an effort, mutter occasional sentences that made sense. Mrs. Stewart patiently fitted them together like the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle until she had a fairly intelligible story of what had elapsed between the time of Breyfogle's first visit to the ranch and his return.

Breyfogle said he had headed south as he planned. That he camped at a small spring part way up the side of a baren mountain range, and was almost immediately visited by Indians, curious to learn about his business. Believing them friendly, Breyfogle explained he was looking for gold whereupon the Indians offered to lead him to a spot where there was more yellow metal than a thousand men could carry away in a hundred moons. Delighted, Breyfogle agreed to follow them.

Remember Breyfogle was quite justified in this action. Local Indians, the Piutes and Pimas were generally a friendly people. Only a year of two before some of them had led the famous scout, trapper and prospector, Capt. Pauline Weaver to one of the richest places gold discoveries ever made in the Southwest, the nugget-strewn gravels of the La Paz diggings over in Arizona near the Colorado River about seventy miles north of Yuma.

Louis Jacob Breyfogle must have felt he was on the trail of another great bonanza. He was. The Indians led him to the gold, a rich quartz vein showing on the surface and spotted through with flakes of gleaming yellow metal. From the samples later brought to Austin it has been estimated that some of the ore must have had a value of several thousand dollars a ton. Breyfogle began breaking off rich portions of the vein.

Nobody will ever know exactly what happened next. What Breyfogle said or did, if anything, to incur the sudden fierce enmity of the Indians who had shown him the mine will be forever locked in mystery.

According to Breyfogle's story, the Indians, having shown him the mine, swiftly changed their minds. Or

perhaps the whole thing was a premeditated trap. At any rate they caught him off guard when he was examining the vein, he said, stoned and beat him until he was unconscious, then left him, supposedly dead beside the golden bonanza.

When he regained consciouness, still half-crazed from the blow on the head he picked up as many pieces of the rich ore as he could carry and staggered down the mountain. Unable to retrace his steps to his camp, or mindful of it, and partly delirious, he started out across the desert afoot, still hugging his precious load to his battered, blood-streaked breast. Counting on the stars for direction at night, and resting in the dubious shade of a hot boulder, or beneath some scrawny mesquite clump during the searing heat of midday, he finally came within sight of the Vegas ranch, where he was seen and rescued.

That in the main was Breyfogle's first story. Later when he regained sufficient strength he went on back to Austin, carrying his ore samples with him, that is, all of them save one or two pieces he left with Mrs. Stewart. He intended to try to find his mine as soon as he could get another outfit together. And he did. In fact he made several trips during the brief span of years that remained to him after his first fearful experience. It was no trouble to raise a grubstake on the strength of his story, backed by the incontrovertible evidence of the samples he had brought back with him.

But somehow he always failed to find the right mountain again. And to Louis Jacob Breyfogle those failures must have been hearbreaking, more maddening that the constant whirring noise that made his head a jangle of machinery run riot ever after his partial recovery at the Vegas ranch. A man of less stamina could never have survived at all.

THE harder Breyfogle tried to concentrate on definite clues that would lead him back to his lost mine, the more confused he became. Successive failures only buried the sound facts deeper in the spreading mud of uncertainty. The broken prospector began following will-o'-the-wisp fantasies, wild hunches that led him over the ever-widening territory. The Amargosas. Into the shadow of the bleak Funeral Range. Clear down into the southeastern edge of Death Valley itself.

Landmarks, distances, time equations became hopelessly hodgepodged in Breyfogle's own contradictory versions of the story. But the truth of the main issue, the existence of the mine itself, was never challenged.

To this day the mine is still an unfound El Dorado, though many carrying on from the time Breyfogle died have tried desperately to locate his fortune in gold, the rich quartz vein that may well prove to be the foundation of a new mining district in southeastern Nevada, quite aside from its promise of individual wealth for the finder.

For a time it seemed as if the inside track was held by William R. Breyfogle, of San Francisco, a grandnephew of Louis Jacob himself. The Breyfogle clue was a map drawn by Jacob shortly after his return to Austin and sent with instructions for its safekeeping to William Breyfogle's father, at the time a lumber merchant in San Francisco, who was too occupied with his own business to pay much attention to prospecting. Nevertheless he put the map away.

Not long ago William announced

he was convinced after a thorough search of the family records that this important map had gone up in smoke.

"It was burned by error with other papers of father's some years ago in San Jose," an Associated Press dispatch from Furnace Creek, California," quotes him as saying. "Father had planned to look for the mine himself several times, but he kept putting it off until he died. Meantime he lent the map to a cousin, but this man also died before he had an opportunity to test out its explicit directions."

William Breyfogle intended to make his own search for the mine, and it was in trying to learn what had become of the map that he discovered it had been burned. When that rare document went up in smoke, so did William Breyfogle's edge on ultimate success.

"I am afraid," he continued in the above quoted interview, "the map was the last chance of finding the mine. The desert sand has probably drifted over any exposed ore by now, and covered up the golden outcrop. That may be why other searches have failed. There was absolutely no question of the ore, or of its value. My father himself saw some of it—quartz shot through with gold bullion. It was rich."

Loss of the map was real tragedy, particularly to the heirs of Louis Jacob Breyfogle. On the other hand, it also means that the lost Breyfogle mine is anybody's game from now on until or unless it is finally and definitely rediscovered.

There is one thing to bear in mind in choosing any specific locality in which to make a search. In many popular accounts of the lost Breyfogle the glamour of the lost bonanza merged with the glamour that has surrounded, and always will surround, Death Valley ever since the fateful Bonner party disaster which gave that dreaded, heat-baked sink its name. Yet it is more than likely that Breyfogle was actually far south of Death Valley, and considerably to the eastward, when he found his mine.

Remember he said he was going "*south*" when he left the Vegas ranch. Death Valley is more directly east. It may be, as several have concluded, that the mine lies somewhere in the mineralized McCullough Range south of Las Vegas by the compass, and about fifteen or twenty miles north and slightly to the westward of Searchlight, once a booming gold camp in southeastern Clark County, and still an active mining district.

Moreover, when the first Searchlight boom was on at about the turn of the present century, remains of a prospector's camp were found near a small spring in a canyon part way up the McCullough's eastern flanks. Breyfogle's camp? Many think it was. And who knows but what they're right?

ARIZONA RANGER

by JAY LUCAS

Part Three

Arizona Ranger

The Story So Far:

WHEN Tex Fletcher, notorious rustler, makes his escape from the Arizona Rangers who had captured him after a long campaign, it seems evident that it was with the help of Lieut. Clint Yancey. Disgraced and dishonored, Yancey is expelled from the organization.

Clint goes to Gulch City, an abandoned mining town which Tex and his gang have taken over as their stronghold. His intention is to join Tex's gang and eventually capture him. Tex accepts him as a member of his gang, and to test him, sends him to kill Billy Armour, a reckless young rustler who is staging a one-man revolution against the gang, having stolen a few head of their rustled cattle to start a little ranch. Clint finds that Billy also hates the gang leader, and they form a partnership. Billy, pretending to be flying from Clint, goes back to Tex and is allowed to rejoin the gang.

The next day Tex, with ten of his men including Clint, starts out across the desert to steal a large band of horses from old Henry Judson, a rancher for whom Clint had once worked. The raid is made successfully, but the horses stampede down the draw, and, following them, Tex and his men run headlong into the Arizona Rangers whom old Judson had hastily summoned. The rustlers try to flee from the rangers, but their mounts, winded by the chase after the stampeding horses, are not equal to the task. Within a few minutes they are surrounded by the rangers who call upon them to surrender.

CHAPTER IX

TREACHERY

CLINT had unconsciously let Reddy take the lead from Tex's big black. Now he pulled hard on the reins. He was already loose, preparing to take a flying leap from his saddle. He hoped that he would alight on his feet, but he had never been a trick rider; and he knew he was more likely to go rolling over and over. He had picked a sandy spot. Even if he did fall, he could soon scramble behind a boulder in the center of it.

As Clint slowed, Tex's black went past him. With a quick grunt, Clint grabbed his saddlehorn barely in time to keep himself on. Tex was erect in his saddle; he had not loosened. He did not intend to stop with his men! Even with all Clint knew of the man's character, he had not expected such treachery as this.

Neither did any of the others leave their saddles, although it was doubtful that any of them noticed what Tex was doing. But they were panic-stricken and so did not obey the leader. Tex might have been glancing back to watch them. At any rate he jerked out a sudden new order:

"Stay on! Make the pass! Kill your horses!"

And that was about what they were doing. They tore madly up the slope, close-packed, quirting and spurring. They drew away from the rangers rapidly now, and the rangers let them do it and saved their own horses. That cruel burst of speed uphill could only be a last gasp. It must end the race.

They heard one of the rangers laugh with grim relish. Those Arizona Rangers were a reckless crowd, and the desperate battle they saw coming would be a thing after their own hearts. A shout came from them. Clint recognized the bass voice of Sergeant Wilson.

"Tex, come back and give me a match!"

And another ranger laughed grimly.

Tex let his men push past him. He was darting quick, calculating glances over their horses as they passed, picking out those most nearly exhausted. Clint could see a crafty look on his face, and wondered what it meant.

Clint refused to pass. He stayed back close to Tex, watching him with hard face. If Tex again tried to desert his men, he would put a bullet through his back before he got twenty feet. He would have no more compunction about it than about killing a rabid coyote. It was the best the man's trickery deserved.

It might have been that Tex suspected what was on Clint's mind. He must have seen that the other man was watching him closely. Or possibly it was the still fairly strong condition of Reddy that decided him. It and Tex's black, though panting and staggering, still had some strength left. At any rate, Tex spoke quickly, not loudly enough for the rangers behind to hear:

"Boys! We can get all of 'em! Jump off—Jim, Curly, Dave! Them rocks at the mouth of the pass—hold 'em back! The rest of us circle the hill an' come in behind 'em!"

Clint caught his breath in a gasp. It might work!

The pass was so narrow and had such steep sides that it was almost a little canyon. Three men could hold the rangers back awhile. The other five coming up from behind could catch them between two fires, and perhaps annihilate them.

IT flashed through Clint's mind that if it worked it would be the most desperate deed ever done in Arizona—and the destruction of about the whole ranger force in one fight.

One horse did not even reach the top of the slope. He fell exhausted fifteen feet from the boulders. His rider went over his head, picked himself up, and ran afoot to the shelter of the rocks. That was Dave Barclay. Curly and Jim were looking jerkily from one side to the other. They saw that Tex had his gun poised in his hand and knew that he might shoot them if they disobeyed again. They flung themselves from the saddles and dashed for the boulders.

As they ran, their backs turned, Tex fired twice. Their two horses lurched and fell. Now the men would have to stay. In the excitement, they would never know that it was their leader who had killed their mounts.

Tex, thudding heavily by, gave them a last encouraging word over his shoulder:

"Hold 'em back, boys! We'll soon be around behind 'em!"

The five left kept steadily on through the pass, in the slow, walloping lope which was the best their horses could do. Clint heard the rattle of guns break out behind. From the sounds, he knew that the rangers had stopped and were shooting back.

The five lurched out of the pass and around the hillside, on a level, and the firing behind grew fainter as the hill came between.

In the bright moonlight, Clint's face looked white. He knew what he was going to do, and was planning the details. He had been kicked out in disgrace by those rangers back there, and he was sought by them as an outltaw. But at heart he was still one of them, still an Arizona Ranger. He held no rancor. They had only done what they thought was right.

There would be four against him, all of them among the best shots in Arizona. The fight could be only a matter of seconds.

He had but one chance: he would wait until Tex and the other three were close behind the rangers. Then, if the fight could be drawn out a few moments, some of the rangers would wheel back and take part in it. Of

course they would not know what was going on, only that part of the rustler gang had got behind them. They would shoot at everybody they saw there, and shoot to kill. There was little hope of coming out of it alive, but he could not let his old companions be wiped out.

Suddenly Clint's head swung up, puzzled. Busy planning, he had not noticed where he was going. He only knew that he had been keeping beside Tex and slightly behind him. Why, they had swung more than halfway around the hill, and now they were turning diagonally away from it.

"Tex!" Clint shouted. "We—"

Tex pulled his staggering horse back beside Clint's. He gave an unpleasant little laugh.

"No, we're not. Too bad about them boys back there, but we got to save our own skins."

Clint looked at him in dumb disbelief. Such a cold-blooded piece of perfidy as this he had never conceived of. He had not thought even the treacherous Tex Fletcher capable of it.

Clint's eyes went slowly to the other men. They looked at him queerly, then at one another. On the faces of two of them was much the same expression as on his own—more disbelief than anything else. Those two men were rustlers, horse thieves, killers, even, but this thing seemed to be too much even for them. All had stopped their horses. One of the two suddenly picked up his reins.

"I'm goin' back!"

The man who had spoken was the burly Butch Tolleson, about whose daughter Clint had joked Billy Armour. Butch had been a rustler most of his life, and everybody knew that he was one of those whom Tex always picked for train robberies and such desperate jobs. But Clint's eyes met his, and from that moment they were friends. After all, there is a certain amount of honor among rustlers.

Tex spoke in his gentlest, friendliest tones—the tone he had used in that last perfidious assurance to the men he had deserted in the pass. He had seen the look on Clint's face, and on Butch's.

"Boys, I sure hate to do it. They was all good men. But would it have helped them if we'd all stayed and got killed with them, like we would have? Can't you see it, boys? Why, there wasn't a chance in the world of us all getting away!"

Butch jerked out a short, bitter oath.

"What of it! Come on, Clint!"

He stooped over his saddlehorn to strike a lope back. Tex darted out a hand and seized his reins.

"Hold on, Butch! It's all over back there—them poor boys are done for."

IT was true. Clint suddenly realized that the shooting back in the pass had stopped. It was too late to help the three men.

Yavapai Slim, whose horse was near Tex's, spoke up now.

"Tex, you're right, like you always are!" He turned to the other three accusingly. "We'd all be dead by this time if Tex hadn't used his head—an' a fat lot o' good us goin' with 'em would have done them three boys."

Butch gave him a contemptuous glance. The other man who had been silent so far nodded half-heartedly. He lacked courage to back up Butch.

Butch's big, shaggy head dropped, and he picked up his reins again.

"Let's go home," he muttered. He sounded sick.

"Boys, I don't want you sore about this," Tex said quickly. "I knew what I was doing. The rangers will go straight on through the pass hunting us. All we got to do is go back the other way an' make no noise. That'll let our horses blow, too."

Clint shook his head.

"Our horses! Daylight will catch us back there with worn-out horses. The rangers will be searching the whole country for us, and they can't help finding us. I'd say that we separate, and try to get back singly to the Silvermines the best way we can. With a lot of luck, one or two of us may make it."

Butch Tolleson nodded agreement. He seemed ready to side with Clint against Tex in almost anything. Tex gave Clint an icy smile.

"Better leave things to me, Clint. I know a lot more than you do about this sort of thing. We're going to get gresh mounts, and good ones."

"Huh!" Butch snorted.

"What you plannin' to do, Tex?" asked Yavapai deferentially.

Tex paused impressively.

"Go back and pick up that bunch of horses we had to leave," he said impressively. "I saw them turn up on the ridge and stop. We can ride five of the best of them. Then if the rangers do run onto us, we can get away from 'em easy. If they don't—well, them horses will make a nice little split for the five of us."

Clint looked up at Tex, and kept his eyes on him. It seemed to be the most brazen piece of audacity he had ever heard of. Then it came to him that Tex was right. The first part of his plan, at least, was their only chance for safety.

"Yes, Tex, fresh horses are our only chance. But we'll never get away with the rest of them. The rangers will be all around the edge of the desert watching for us."

Tex looked at him patronizingly.

"Sure—but knowing where they are that way will help a lot. All we have to do is circle around 'em, without going near the desert, and cut straight for the Mexican line."

Yavapai gave a sneering little laugh and looked at Clint mockingly.

"Leave it to Tex Fletcher! Won't everybody in Arizona cuss the rangers when they hear how we made monkeys of 'em!"

"Our pack mules," began Clint, "hobbled out there on the desert. They'll starve. Of course you'll—"

Tex gave him a venomous glance, but cut in heartily:

"Oh, sure, sure! I was figuring on sending Brad here back to drive 'em home, as soon as we get the bunch going well. Well, let's get started, boys. Quiet, now!"

They struck out silently and slowly through the cedars.

Back in the little pass three huddled, bullet-torn figures lay among the boulders. And out toward the desert the rangers, riding staggering horses, spread in a wide dragnet, eyes fixed on the country ahead. Surely, they thought, they should catch up with the rest of the rustlers pretty soon!

AT dawn the cowboys of the Kite Cross were finishing a quick breakfast in the cook shack. Old Ernie had gone dashing to bring them from Eagle Springs. They had not stopped to remove their chaps before eating, for they would soon be in their saddles again. They had eaten almost in total silence, and now they were quickly rolling cigarettes, in grim silence.

They were waiting for four of the men who were out driving in any fresh mounts that they might find

on the range; the choice horses of the outfit were gone. Riding anything that could be hastily picked up, they could not hope to overtake the thieves. It was no wonder that they looked bitter!

Les Bailey came in. He had a bloody bandage around his head, and his clothes were torn. That fight he had had with the horse thieves the night before had been a desperate one. The cowboys wondered why they had never been inclined to trust this man who had only been in the outfit a couple of months.

Bailey had a little piece of paper in his hand, and he looked puzzled.

"Boys, I found this stuck on the gatepost of the corral," he said. "Reckon it must be Tex sorter makin' fun of us or somethin'."

"What's it say?" one of the men asked without much interest.

"I can't read it. It's Spanish. You savvy Spanish, Bud, an' you, too, Jerry. What's it say?"

Bud took the paper and glanced over it. He looked at the wall a moment, silently, and handed the note to Jerry.

"You read it, Jerry—aloud," he said quietly.

He himself moved back, casually stepped behind Les Bailey. Jerry looked at the note, whitened a trifle. Then, slowly and deliberately, he read aloud:

> "Watch the man with a little scar like a V on the back of his left hand near the thumb. He rides old Brownie's colt. He is a spy for Tex Fletcher and told him about the horses."

Les Bailey felt a little tug at his waist, and his hand slapped down on an empty holster. He leaped for the door, but arms seized his elbows from behind. Somebody picked up a rope. Bailey started to scream, but a hand clamped over his mouth and he was hustled toward the door. There was a dense clump of tall cedars halfway up the ridge—

It is not a pretty story, but the cowboys of the Kite Cross did not pretend to be saints.

Old Henry Judson did not know about it until it was all over. He happened to see the cowboys come trooping down the ridge, very gravely, with bowed heads. He ran out in horror, and presently went slowly back to the house, his lined old face working.

Later, when his cowboys had ridden out to try to track down the rustlers, he sat in his living room talking to Sergeant Wilson.

Wilson was a great, sturdy man who always stood with his booted legs wide apart. Now he looked haggard, almost savage, his face covered with dust. When he spoke, his deep voice sounded hollow and weary.

"Yes, the same man talked to Ernie and left the note. Ernie said there was something stiff about how he spoke, like he was watching every word. Of course he's a Mexican Lots of 'em speak good English but can't write it."

Judson's old face looked sad, and he shook his head slowly.

"Uh huh, he must be. I . . . I was hopin', kinda, that it mighta been Clint Yancey. I hear he's with Tex's gang now."

A SWIFT flush swept up Wilson's cheeks at mention of Yancey's name. He seemed to tremble with sudden fury.

"Yancey! I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Mr. Judson, but one of the men in the pass lived long enough to talk a little. Clint Yancey was in the gang stealing your horses. He got to be about Tex's right-hand man. He's the one that stole down

"Keep going, you yellow rat!" Clint yelled at Tex. Then behind them hell broke loose.

and opened the gate to get the horses out."

The old man sagged in his big armchair. He blinked, and there was pain in his eyes, as though he had been struck across the face.

"He . . . he— Clint used to be a good boy. I always thought a heap of him." His voice caught, and his head sank slowly. Sergeant Wilson laid a kindly hand on the thin shoulder.

"Forget the rat! He fooled us, too, and we thought as much of him as you did."

"Mebbe," Judson said uncertainly. "Mebbe if I didn't press the charge about them horses—"

The tiredness left Sergeant Wilson's voice. He spoke slowly, grimly.

"It will make no difference, Mr. Judson. I don't think any of the rangers can take Clint Yancey—alive."

Old Judson shook his bowed head. He understood.

There was another pause. Wilson sat down, rolled a cigarette, and looked broodingly at his outstretched boots.

"That Mexican seems to be at outs with the gang. There's something wrong there," he said thoughtfully. "I think you were very wise to tell Ernie to say nothing about that talk at Secret Tank. We don't want to get that Mexican killed till we see if he couldn't be useful to us later on. It's strange about that note on the gatepost. Nobody knows where it came from."

The old man nodded absently as though not half hearing the words. His thoughts seemed to be far away. Wilson stood up, reached for his hat.

"Queer about that spy of Tex's. I wonder how he managed to get away so quickly this morning."

The old man glanced up sharply. Suddenly his eyes fell and his lips twitched. Sergeant Wilson started, and his keen blue eyes fixed on the old man. A set look came to his face, and he spoke deliberately:

"Mr. Judson, I don't know where Les Bailey could have gone to and I see no reason to make an investigation around the ranch."

He paused in the doorway.

"But Les Bailey was a gentleman compared to Clint Yancey. Bailey's treachery wasn't all practiced on his friends. We let your horses be stolen last night, but one thing we rangers will promise: Clint Yancey is about at the end of his rope. He hasn't long to live."

With slow, heavy tread, he went out to his horse, mounted, and turned up the ridge. The set of his heavy jaw was not a pleasant thing to see.

CHAPTER X

A RUSTLER'S PLEDGE

THE patio of Don Luis Cabera de Vaca's *rancheria* was bright with the afternoon sun. Don Luis himself was sprawled gracefully in a rocking chair. He had guests.

There were some who said that the don had no right to the proud Castilian name of Cabeza de Vaca. But there were more who said that he had been really born to it, and perhaps they were right. At any rate, he looked the Spanish aristocrat.

He was young, and tall, and slender. His skin, only slightly tanned, was almost fair, and there was a noticeable brown tinge to his dark hair. He had a graceful little streak of black mustache across his upper lip, and when he smiled, his small, perfect white teeth showed in two even rows. His handsome, gentle eyes were so dark that one could hardly tell where pupil ended and iris began.

There was a very long, chocolate-colored cigarette in his long fingers. Occasionally he puffed at it languidly. His immense sombrero alone, with its weighty band of gold and silver, would have been fair trade for the best horse and saddle within many a day's ride. And the rest of his clothes matched, from his little braided jacket to the huge, flaring bell bottoms of his trousers, with their inserts of crimson silk flashing above his small feet. His spurs might have been worth even more than his sombrero. They weighed almost a pound apiece and had rowels as big as saucers. And each had two little bells of pure silver to mingle their sweet tone with the jingle of the rowels when he walked.

Don Luis drew up one graceful knee and clasped his long fingers around it. He gave his head a slight little shake, and smiled sadly, apologetically.

"But, Señor Fletcher, not possibly can I pay you fifteen thousand for those horses. I should then have to sell them at a loss."

He spoke almost perfect English, spoke it rapidly and fluently, without pausing to grope for words.

Tex leaned back in his own chair. As always, he looked tall and commanding, with his great, impressive beak of a nose. He took his cigar from his mouth and blew a puff of smoke into the air.

"Well, I'm sorry, Don Luis, but I'll have to take them on down to old Alarcón. He'll pay more. I tell you them aren't horses you'll sell in a bunch. It'll be one or two at a

time to wealthy *hacendados* or army officers. You'll be able to clean up a lot on them."

Don Luis looked very sad.

"Ah, how I should love to have the handling of those horses. Never have I seen such fine horses. But, my friend, with times as they are in Mexico, I cannot get all those fine horses are worth. Perhaps two hundred dollars for one or two of the best, and some will bring me not more than a hundred. Yes, perhaps Señor Alarcón will pay you more. You must take them there, sadly though I regret that we old friends cannot make the arrangement."

He looked broken-hearted. Tex leaned forward to stand up, his hands on the arms of his chair.

"Well, I'm sorry, too, Don Luis."

He paused that way a moment, and suddenly sat back again, his face relaxing; now that the little game was over.

"ALL right, compadre, seeing as we're old friends, I'll let you have them for the twelve thousand. Anyway, I don't want to make the long drive down to Alarcón's place."

Don Luis did not have to relax. He had been relaxed all the time. He gave a graceful little shrug of assent and took another puff of his long cigarette.

"And now, Señor Fletcher, how do we arrange it for your men?"

Tex contemplated the end of his cigar.

"I think some of 'em are getting suspicious. Tell you what we can do: I'll hunt my men up and get them to bunch the horses. I'll tell them I have to take 'em down to Alarcón's. Then just as we're ready to start, you come strolling out and say that you've decided to come up to my figure and pay nine thousand. I'll play like I'd as soon go on down and try to get more, but you can offer me the money in cash, and I'll take it, right before the men. I'll split with them right there, so they can see how much I'm keeping."

"And now I give you—three thousand, is it not?"

"That's right."

Don Luis reached casually into his pocket and pulled out a big roll of American bills. Carelessly as a bank teller, he thumbed off a few and handed them to Tex. Tex got up and reached for his hat, which lay beside him on a bench. He was going to hold out his hand, but Don Luis was looking absently down at his boot toes.

"Well, thanks, Don. It'll be an hour or two before I can roundup my men, I reckon, and get the horses ready to go. You can be on the lookout."

"*Hasta la vista.*"

Don Luis said it sleepily, but with a little smile on his face, and Tex turned and left the patio.

Don Luis sat there with eyes half closed. He had thrown away his cigarette. The little smile was still on his handsome lips. Presently he raised his head.

"Felipe!" he called.

A thickset and villainous-looking Mexican slipped from a doorway and came toward him respectfully. Don Luis was king here, and all others his subjects.

"*Sí, patrón.*"

Don Luis mused a moment, lighting a fresh cigarette. Then he nodded, smiled again. He spoke softly without troubling to look up, "Tonight, Felipe, at Cinco Santos."

"*Sí, patrón.*"

The man hurried off. For a few

moments, Don Luis sat relaxed in his chair, that little smile playing gently over his handsome face. Then, with a yawn, he flicked the ashes from his cigarette, stood up, and strolled gracefully through a doorway. He was sleepy. His interview with Tex had made him almost half an hour late for his siesta.

A pace or two from where he had been sitting, there was an open door, and toward it an old Mexican woman came shuffling across the patio. She had the air of one who had wanted to go there sooner but had not dared to disturb the patrón. Inside the room, which the door opened into, there came a quick whisper:

"Let's go!"

Clint and Butch Tolleson ran on tiptoe across the room and dived clumsily through a window. Outside, they swept quick, nervous glances all around. There was nothing in sight but a mangy-looking dog sleeping in the shadow of the adobe wall, flies thick around him.

"This way!" whispered Clint.

They went hurrying down beside the wall, trying to look unconcerned in case anybody saw them. At the corner, they slowed, and went strolling away. Clint drew a deep breath.

"Thank heavens for the siesta they take! It's all that saved us."

Butch took out a big red handkerchief and mopped his face quietly.

"Well, we *did* get out of there alive! That's the last time I'll let you talk me into spot like that. If we'd been caught in there, we'd have had a dozen knives through our livers by this time."

Clint grinned. "Oh, I wouldn't say that. But we'd have had to do the fastest shooting of our lives. I'm glad I took to wearing two guns on the way down here. That smooth-looking young don gives me the creeps. He's dangerous."

OUT in the open, there was a bench under the shade of a thick chinaberry tree. They had reached it now, and they sat down.

"I wonder," mused Clint, "what that thing was about Cinco Santos?"

"Some private business of the don's, I reckon. His range runs up to about there."

Clint shook his head uneasily.

"That's where we're staying tonight on our way home."

Butch was not interested.

"Clint, what I can't figure out is why you took the risk of spyin' on Tex and the don. Me, I've always had a notion that he might have been holdin' out a little on us, an' likely so had some of the other boys. The point is, a feller that thinks anything like that had better keep it to himself."

"Why?"

Butch looked at him oddly.

"I see you don't know Gulch City well yet. There's some mighty deep old mine shafts there, with mebbe a hundred feet or more of water at the bottom. I don't know anything for sure—only that it don't pay to make any remarks about Tex Fletcher 'cause you might turn up missin' some mornin'."

Clint sat frowning down at the ground.

Butch drew his great lungs full of cigarette smoke. It came belching slowly out through his mouth as he went on broodingly, "Tex has about the best snitcher system in the world. Everybody knows Yavapai Slim's the head, but they don't know who else is in it. Clint, yo're the only man in the world I'd talk this way to, an' feel sure that I'd be eatin' breakfast tomorrow mornin'."

Clint looked up suddenly.

"Then why the devil," he burst

out, "do you fellows stay in the rustling game? Why, the whole thing's rotten, clean through to the core!"

Butch nodded. The corners of his heavy mouth hung a trifle.

"We know it. But if one of us quits him an' goes outside to try to live, we're danglin' from the end of a rope before you could say 'scat.' Whether Tex has anything to do with that, we don't know, but it happens too regular to look like accident." He shook his grizzled head. "Anyways, I don't know as how most of us is so crazy to give up rustlin', or even to quit Tex's bunch. Why, look at this week. Our cut out o' them horses will be about fifteen hundred dollars each. I couldn't make that much clear in two years o' workin' honest, an' I'd do well to make it in a year o' rustlin' without Tex."

"I'm coming to believe Tex is about the cleverest man in all Arizona," Clint said presently. "He seems to have a good trick for everything that comes up—and a dozen more up his sleeve, to spare."

Butch nodded bitterly.

"Sure! A dozen tricks to save Tex Fletcher's neck an' make money for him. When the rest of us is hung, Tex'll be retired an' livin' high in San Francisco or somewhere, smokin' big cigars. He'll fix it for a fake trial for himself, or a pardon or something, when he's ready to quit."

Clint looked up at him suddenly.

"Butch, what if you could get a pardon?"

Butch shook his head slowly.

"Fine chance I'd have, with my record! Oh, if I could—" He sat looking up into the air a moment, and the cigarette went out in his mouth. "Listen, Clint. I'd do dang near anything to get one. I got a few dollars cached that would start me a little brand. It ain't religious. It's—it's that little gal o' mine. He turned to Clint, his heavy face earnest. "Clint, Gulch City's no place to raise a gal, an' make anything out o' her. An' even if I do keep her decent, when she goes out in the world an' some one asks her what her dad was—"

Butch shook his graying head again.

OLD-TIMER," Clint said thoughtfully, "I think I can talk to you—tell you something I wouldn't dare say to anybody else. What would you think if I told you that I was figuring on trying to take Tex's gang away from him—or at least split it and take all I can of it?"

Butch looked up in astonishment.

"I'd say you was crazy, an' that the bottom o' one o' them old mine shafts is a mighty unpleasant place to end up."

"And if I'd say, just between the two of us, that Tex isn't the only one who can figure out ways to get pardons? Not saying," Clint added hastily, "that I know it would work."

He saw a slight change in Butch's face.

"No, no, Butch, you got me wrong! I'm not in with the rangers. They're a lot more anxious to get me than they are you—or maybe even Tex. And they want me dead. They'll shoot on sight when they see me."

Butch was staring at the ground now, his forehead wrinkled with deep thought. "Do you think you can work it? Any of it?"

"I don't know. I'll be honest with you, Butch. I'm taking some long chances, and I know it. If Tex doesn't get me, likely the rangers

will. And if not, I'll probably end up with the rope around my neck."

"An' that," muttered Butch, "was why you wanted the straight on Tex crookin' us—to have a story to stir the crowd up against him."

"Yes. It's risky business. I hate to ask you to throw in with me."

Still Butch sat looking at the ground, not even aware that his cigarette had gone out. They sat there in silence a very long time. Clint's heart was sinking. If even Butch Tolleson would not go over to him, who would?

They heard a shout, and saw Yavapai Slim waving to them from down near the corrals. The farce of starting to drive the horses away was about to begin. The two stood up slowly. Clint raised a dejected face to find Butch's faded eyes fixed on his own. It struck Clint as odd that this man, a rustler and worse, had about the most honest and straightforward eyes he had ever seen.

"Clint, I'm stickin' with you!" Butch said, slowly.

There was not even a handshake, but Clint knew that this big rustler was one man upon whom he could depend no matter what happened. He thought of Butch starting stolidly back to the little pass where his friends were, to be killed with them.

"Thanks, Butch."

Side by side, they started walking toward the corrals, where Tex and Yavapai Slim waited.

CHAPTER XI

AT CINCO SANTOS

FOR about the twentieth time, Clint got up from his hard, homemade chair and tiptoed to the little window. He yawned, and peered out. He rubbed his chin sleepily, and tried to figure out whether it was getting light in the east or not.

He stole back and sat down again, his head resting against the adobe wall a foot from the crack he had left open between door and jamb. Across the corridor was the door of Tex's room. Yavapai had the next one on Tex's side.

There had been only three rooms, and Clint and Butch had offered to share one of them. All night they had taken turns at keeping this vigil. Now Clint could hear the heavy breathing of the sleeping Butch. And that was all Clint could hear—that and the distant yapping of a dog.

Suddenly Clint blinked. He had been dozing, and something, he did not know what, had woke him. He listened intently in the darkness.

There it came again—the crowing of a cock somewhere out among the shabby huddle of flat-roofed adobes that made Cinco Santos. Once more Clint hurried to the window. This time there was no mistake about it. The stars on the eastern horizon were paler than before. But for all that, it seemed darker than ever.

He stole across to the bed and shook Butch's shoulder. Without a sound, with hardly a noticeable change in his breathing, Butch sat up, wide-awake. A man in his business soon learns to come awake with all his wits about him, or he does not last long.

"Huh? Oh, my turn."

"Daylight, Butch. Say, I've been thinking that we might saddle all our horses and bring them down here. Then we can get Tex to make an early start. Wish he'd listened to me last night, and kept on after supper. But of course I could only

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COTTONWOOD SHADOWS

by STANLEY G. ALLEN

Cottonwood Shadows

ALTHOUGH his eyes looked with unwavering attention on the jail at the far end of Capstone's only street, Barney Chapman was keenly aware that he had become a target for the stares of townsfolk congregated in small groups along that dusty thoroughfare. Without hearing, he knew what they were saying, too. They were calling him a fool; a fool who always came to the aid of his younger brother whenever Vance got in trouble.

More than a little bitterly, Barney Chapman agreed with the townsfolk's opinion of him. Yet he headed his roan straight for the jail where he found Sheriff Corbett and old Sam Ellington sitting in the shade.

"Well, Barney. You're here again I see," said Corbett, rising slowly and knocking the dust off the seat of his overalls. "I kinda expected you would be. And so did Sam here."

Sam Ellington, wizened little horse rancher from out Powder Springs way, nodded soberly.

"What's Vance done now?" asked Barney bluntly. "Been gettin' his saddle on the wrong horse again?"

"Yep," Ellington answered. "Got away with two of my horses, a gray and a bay. He'd sold the bay, was ridin' the gray when Corbett and me ketched up with him. Of course he'd blowed in the money he got on the sale—fifty dollars. Now I don't want to cause trouble, Barney"—Ellington was almost apologetic—"but, hard up as I am, I can't afford losin' horses. If you could make good for that bay Vance sold——"

"Would sixty dollars be good?" Barney's face wore a set, angry look as he heard his younger brother's boots clumping back and forth across the jail floor in there.

"Yeah, that'd be plenty square—far as I'm concerned," Ellington agreed.

"As far as he's concerned, yeah," Sheriff Corbett grunted. "But me, I'm gettin' danged tired of chasin' out roundin' up one Vance Chapman. And folks are gettin' tired of seein' him turned loose, bought outa trouble all the time. He's twenty-one years old now. He'd ought to have a little sense by this time, Barney."

"So I've often thought." Rancor ebbed into Barney's tone as he dug into his pocket, brought out money he had earned by hard days of riding out on Red Mesa. Sixty dollars he paid Sam Ellington. The other ten he gave to Sheriff Corbett for his leniency.

Soon a key clicked in a rusty lock, and young Vance Chapman was standing there in the jail door. He essayed a sheepish smile as he met the eyes of his older brother. That smile was short-lived under Barney's look of searing contempt. Vance, who resembled his taller brother, lowered his own reckless brown eyes and mumbled:

"Thanks again, Barney. I'm sorry about——"

"You're always sorry," Barney cut in, "for at least five minutes after I buy you out of a scrape. But there'll be no more agains, Vance. This is the end of forkin' hard-earned dollars over to you. From now on you'll work, or you'll steal more horses and wind up in the pen. That's up to you."

"I didn't *ask* you to come and buy me outa this scrape, did I?" Vance burst out, his face flushing to a brick-red.

"No, it was my own crazy idea," Barney retorted sharply. His tone

softened a little as he added, "I came past the Diamond L outfit on my way to town. Old Smith over there says he'll give you a job, if you really *want* to work. If you do, you can see him when he drives to town this afternoon in his buckboard. If you don't want to work, keep on tryin' to steal horses, and the state'll give you free board—if somebody don't rope-stretch your neck in the meantime." Barney turned away, moved toward his roan horse.

"Maybe I'll take that job, Barney." There was contrition in Vance Chapman's manner. "Anyhow, there'll be no more horse stealin'. I promise you that."

"You mean that?" Barney demanded skeptically.

"I do!" Vance said with almost solemn earnestness.

Their eyes met for a moment. Hesitatingly, Vance extended his hand, and Barney gripped it warmly.

"I'll be seeing you, kid," he said and turned away, sorry that he could not spare more time to talk to this brother whom he seemed to see so seldom. But he had been away from his job too long already.

As he rode back down Capstone's only street, Barney wished he had enough money to buy a couple of shirts and a pair of overalls. But there was only a dollar left, a silver dollar worn slick from pocket shine. Still, it would buy a sack of tobacco. And maybe a quarter's worth of candy for a girl whose blue eyes had taken to haunting Barney of late.

He tied his roan, went into the Capstone store and bought his tobacco and candy. While he made his meager purchase, he ignored a loafer in the store—"Straight" Marquard, a gambler whose nickname—derived from a propensity to bet high stakes on "straights"—was misleading to strangers.

Marquard, big, portly, and with a surplus of gold watch chain dangling across his expansive chest, seemed to resent being ignored. At last he drawled, "Well, Chapman, they tell me you're in town to spring another coyote trap with hard-earned money. Too bad your kid brother likes poker so much better than work, when he's so unlucky at cards."

"It's too bad, all right," Barney agreed coolly, his eyes measuring the gambler. "I wish you'd quit takin' his money, Marquard. I'm afraid he don't get much of a run for it."

A hint of color ebbed into the tinhorn's rotund face. "I guess there's no chance of me gettin' much of *your* money, Chapman. Buyin' a measly quarter's worth of candy, even to give a damned nester's daughter, brands a man for what he is—a cheap skate to the core."

A quirt lash across his lean face couldn't have stung Barney any worse than the sneering words of the big man lounging on the counter. Little sparks, fed by the suddenly kindled flame within him, burned the puncher's eyes as he answered:

"Maybe it does look kinda cheap, Marquard, but we can't all spend your kind of money. Some of us are a little clumsy at stackin' cards. Most of us wouldn't if we could. But those coyote paws of yours still ain't quicker than my eyes. And I've watched you play, watched you pickin' your carcasses clean—if you savvy what I mean."

"I savvy you're callin' me a damned card cheat!" With a roar Marquard came off the counter, in a movement fast for a man of his size. Two strides and he was lashing out at the man who stood there,

straight and lean and tense before him.

Knuckles barely grazing Barney Chapman's face blasted the rolled brim of his dusty hat up against the crown, a blow that fanned sparks into flame. Shifting his stance with lightning speed, Barney jolted a fist to the gambler's chest, brought up a quick left jab to the nose and whipped over a lip-splitting right again.

For a few seconds blows landed, vicious, anger-driven thrusts that battered and bruised. Some Barney Chapman took. More he landed. One of the latter caught Marquard hard on the side of the face, unbalanced him. Before the big man could recoup, he was taking another one flush on the jaw. He started to sag, but Barney, leaping like a lean wolf to the kill, lashed out once more and caught his target with a final swing; one that sprawled the gambler's bulk against a creaking counter.

"Gosh!" gulped the bald-headed storekeeper. Then other men were entering the store. Barney strode past them, got his horse and headed for Red Mesa, the high tableland, sixteen miles due west of town, which shelved off the slope of the Tepee Mountains.

AS he rode along, he felt no particular elation from his victory over Straight Marquard. Yet this trip to town had its reward. And that was the look in young Vance Chapman's dark eyes when he had made a promise to his brother. Somehow Barney had a feeling that Vance would keep that promise.

Then Barney was reminded of a promise he himself had made—to his mother as she lay dying in the bare little shack she had tried to make into a home for her two sons.

"Promise you'll take care of Vance," she whispered to her older son. "That you'll be father and mother to him, Barney."

Although Barney Chapman himself had been only eighteen years old when he made that promise, he had done his best to be both father and mother to twelve-year-old Vance. But the younger boy had shown a streak of recklessness and irresponsibility that was impossible to control. And since they had come to Red Mesa a short year ago, Barney had had to get him out of one scrape after another.

Well, he had done his best. If often he had been tempted to dish out the same medicine to Vance that Straight Marquard had taken today, he was glad that he hadn't. Nor did he begrudge the sacrifice he had made for his younger brother, if now the latter would stick to the straight and narrow trail. And something told Barney Chapman he would.

At sundown the roan climbed up through a notch in the rim of Red Mesa and headed across a range on which was scattered the cabins of a half-dozen homesteaders, families who had pooled their little bunches of cattle into one fairly good-sized herd which Barney, the "association" rider, looked after, and which now grazed on summer range up there on the green slope of the mountain beyond.

It was at the Clark cabin, a new one not quite completed yet, that Barney reined up his roan.

A moment later slim, brown-haired Faye Clark was standing there in the doorway and calling happily, "Barney! You're just in time for supper."

"Sure!" called old Lew Clark, Faye's father. "Yank the saddle off

your roan, Barney. He looks like he's had quite a ride today."

"Yeah, I've been to town."

Barney, never inclined to talk much, didn't explain just what business had taken him to town. And if Faye noticed his skinned cheekbones, she made no reference to the fact.

Old Lew was curious to know how the cattle were doing up on the mountain slope.

"They tell me there's some bad patches of poison weed up there, Barney," he said anxiously.

"Yeah." Barney nodded. "And we've been havin' lots of showers, which always makes poison weed easier for cattle to pull up by the roots, and get worse doses of. But I've only lost three head out of the whole bunch so far. It takes quite a lot of ridin'."

Later, when night had sowed silver stars over the mesa sky, Barney saddled his roan and bade Faye good night. He hesitated quite a while before offering her the meager sack of candy he had bought, and when he finally brought it out of the saddle pocket, he could hear the echo of Marquard's contemptuous voice saying, "Cheap skate!"

"Thanks, Barney." If Faye had been accepting a five-pound box of candy her voice and manner couldn't have been more gracious.

"It's an awful little dab, I'm afraid, Faye."

"It shows you remember me, doesn't it?"

"Yes," he confessed quietly. "I—I guess I'll always remember you, Faye. Well, so long."

"So long, Barney. It's our turn to take grub up to your camp next time. Maybe I'll bring it."

"I hope so."

"And I'm glad you won the fight with—well, whoever you fought with, Barney. I know you did. Your face isn't skinned as much as your knuckles . . ."

FOR three days, working out from his mountain camp at Slope Springs, Barney scattered rock salt and kept the cattle in his charge off the great blue patches of larkspur weed, poison which, when eaten excessively, caused cattle to bloat up, stagger blindly and die.

One morning Joel Thatcher, the squat, stony-faced owner of the big Mill Iron spread, came riding past the camp with three of his men.

"Ridin' kinda early this mornin', ain't you, Joel?" Barney asked, smiling.

"Early enough to ketch a coyote, I think," was Thatcher's flat, unemotional reply. "And if you think you can spring him out of *this* trap, you're crazy, Chapman."

"What do you mean?" Barney tensed.

"I mean that nobody steals Mill Iron horses off the range—and lives. Come on, fellers. Let's get over to Blind Canyon!"

Four men spurred their horses away, leaving Barney standing there appalled. More horse stealing going on! So Vance had broken his promise. . . .

Barney saddled a horse and struck out after the four riders, who were riding at a hard gallop. They had reached the stone portals of Blind Canyon, the entrance to the grassy, rim-locked swale, when he caught up with them. But Barney paid no heed to Thatcher and his men for a moment. His dark eyes, hard and bitter, focused on the slender form of his younger brother sprawled there on the grass with an empty quart bottle near his hand.

"Come out of it, Chapman!"

Thatcher bawled at the sleeper. "Drinkin' and horse thievin' don't go together very well!" The cowman's gun was drawn, as were those of his riders.

Barney saw Vance sit up and blink vacuous, heavy-lidded eyes at the men who had aroused him.

"What—what you want, Thatcher?" he asked thickly.

"I want them Mill Iron horses you're holdin' in this canyon. Horses that was run off the mesa last night."

"No Mill Iron horses in this bunch I've got." Vance hadn't even seen Barney yet. "These are Slash W horses that I rounded up yesterday for old man McQuade. He's gone away for a few weeks. Wants me to break some of his broncs while he's gone."

"Yeah!" Thatcher snorted. He turned to one of his men and ordered him to ride into the canyon and drive out the penned-up horses.

The rider obeyed while the cowman and his other riders sat there with drawn guns.

"Why, hello, Barney!" Vance noticed his brother for the first time. "How come you're——"

SHUT up!" Barney ground out. He was watching a bunch of horses trotting out of the canyon's mouth. Six of those horses, he observed with a sinking feeling, bore the Mill Iron brand.

"Well, fer——" gulped young Vance as his bleary eyes took in the string of horses. "That's funny."

"Not so funny—for you!" snapped Thatcher. "You won't try stealin' no more horses. Tie him up, Gus. We'll take him back to the ranch—and to that big cottonwood growin' by the barn!"

"Wait, Thatcher!" The words were torn from Barney's set lips.

"Wait, hell!" rasped the stony-eyed cowman. "They've waited too long already to lynch this horse-thievin' skunk! Don't try stoppin' us, Barney. There's four of us against you. And you're on the wrong side of the fence."

The muscles in Barney's face tightened into hard lumps. This was more than a scrape. Vance had deliberately set out to steal Joel Thatcher's horses, not to relieve any immediate pressure for money, but because he was too lazy and worthless to earn an honest living. He had finally got himself into serious trouble, something he could not be bought out of this time, and Barney was damned if he'd try to save him again. Even if he wanted to, there was nothing he could do. Thatcher and his men were determined to administer justice, as they saw it, and every man on the range would agree that they had a right to take matters into their own hands.

Hand clenched on the horn of his saddle, Barney stared at his brother's slumping back and listened to the sound of hoofs plodding along. Thatcher's men were leading their prisoner back toward the Mill Iron buildings, and into Barney's mind flashed a picture of the big cottonwood tree by the barn.

But when he thought of Vance's limp body dangling helplessly from a swaying tree branch, Barney's face went gray. Whatever the kid had done, he was still his brother, and Barney had given his solemn word that he would take care of him.

He spurred his lagging horse and called hoarsely, "Joel, wait!"

"Well?" Thatcher reined up his horse impatiently.

As the other riders and their prisoner rode on, Barney said, "He's my brother, Joel. There must be something I can do to save his neck, even

if it looks like it ain't worth savin' to the rest of the world."

"We caught him red-handed, didn't we?" Thatcher said flatly.

"Yeah, I know. But if you'll give me a chance to get him plumb out of this country, I'll make it right with you. Anything you say, Joel. And you know my word's good."

Thatcher hesitated while his owlish eyes blinked. But Barney saw a look of speculation deepen in those eyes. At last Thatcher said:

"You've got a lot of nerve, Chapman. Askin' favors of *me*. Yeah, after you throwin' in with a bunch of damned range-grabbin' nesters! Herdin' their cattle for 'em."

"I've often wondered if you didn't hate the homesteaders," Barney said. "You've kept it under your hat pretty well. But they're on the mesa to stay, Joel."

"If they lost their cattle, their only means of makin' a dollar, they *couldn't* stay, could they?" The cowman's eyes were cold as ice. "And they'd lose 'em, too—the whole damned works—if somebody wasn't ridin' like a fool to keep 'em off poison weed."

"What are you drivin' at, Thatcher?"

"This. You want to save your brother's scalp. Well, there's just *one* way you can, Chapman. See that them nester cattle are kept off good feed for a few days. Then, after the next rain, throw 'em in on poison weed. Bloat the hell outa 'em. Then, when they're carcasses, come down to the Mill Iron and get your precious brother."

Barney's sun-tanned face flamed. "Of all the dirty——"

"That's my proposition, Chapman," snapped the other. "Take it or leave it. But make up your mind fast—or Vance Chapman's goin' to be swingin' from a cottonwood."

Those next two minutes under Thatcher's hard eyes were torture for Barney, minutes when the sight of poisoned cattle staggering blindly to their death alternated with the vision of a limp body swinging from a cottonwood.

"I'll do it," he said at last, his voice harsh.

"All right," Thatcher nodded, "I'll hold Vance down at my place for a week. Don't try gettin' him till you've kept your end of the bargain, Chapman, or else——"

"Yeah, and you see that you keep him safe," Barney countered, "or you and me'll shoot it out later, Thatcher. That's another promise I'll keep!"

"Fair enough." The rancher spurred away to overtake the riders and their prisoner while Barney, his eyes clouded with bitterness, turned back toward the Slope Springs camp.

THE following day—it was nearly noon—Faye Clark came riding up to the Slope Springs camp. She was leading a pack horse laden with the grub which she had promised to bring.

"Hello, Barney!" she called in a bright, lilting voice.

"Hello, Faye." The tall puncher's voice sounded hollow, and it was hard for him to force a smile. "I'm glad to see you."

"Are you?" she asked quietly, studying his face. "You—you look tired, Barney. Like you'd been carrying the whole world around on those broad shoulders of yours."

"Maybe I'm just hungry. Let's cook up some dinner."

The girl helped him get the meal, but she could tell that he wasn't hungry. Even the home-made doughnuts she had brought along didn't seem to tempt his appetite. His eyes evaded the girl's; kept gaz-

ing off toward a herd of cattle too closely bunched along a water course where the feed was short and badly trampled.

"You'd think those dogies would graze out a little farther," Faye observed. "But at this time of day they stick pretty close to the water, I guess."

Barney nodded, winced inwardly. Faye went on, "I'm thankful for all the good grass on this slope and that on the mesa. And so is dad. It was mighty poor range we left behind when we moved to this country. Now there's feed, and hope, for us as well as the other homesteaders. Soon there'll be more cattle than you can take care of, Barney. Why don't you get a few head of your own, so we can all prosper together?"

"I've thrown my money away," he said a little bitterly.

"There's still a good homestead site right next to ours," she told him. "Maybe you could take it up, Barney?"

"I think I'll be leavin' the mesa range pretty soon, Faye." Barney's jaw was set rigidly; his eyes were somber.

"I—I see." There was a little catch in the girl's voice. "Well, I'll be getting along home. Good-by, Barney."

"Prosperity!" Barney growled to himself as he watched Faye ride off. "If she guessed what was goin' to happen to the Clark cattle——" He thought of the other homesteaders then. Dave Adams, a hard-working man with a big family; old Jeff Claridge who was so crippled with rheumatism that his toilworn wife had most of the work to do! Chris Johnson, the gaunt, blond man who had once lost a big cow outfit through adversity, and was now trying to make another start. . . .

Suddenly hate surged over Barney, hate for the treacherous, stony-eyed man who had put him in this predicament. As bad as Vance was, Joel Thatcher was worse. Abruptly then Barney knew that he wouldn't go through with this hideous bargain. If dumb brutes ate poison weed, bloated and died, it wouldn't be his doing! The rôle of Judas wasn't for him, no matter what were the consequences.

He saddled his own horse, a high-withered roan, and went out to scatter the cattle he had bunched that morning. Hours later he returned to camp, packed his few personal belongings in a gunny sack and headed toward the mesa. At his hip was slung an old .45. In the saddle boot was thrust a .30-30 rifle.

SHORTLY after dark that warm summer night Barney Chapman tied his roan in a cedared draw above the Mill Iron ranch buildings. He took off his spurs and made his way afoot toward those buildings dimly silhouetted in the starlight. Carrying the rifle in his hand, he stalked the Mill Iron place like a wary Indian. Always he kept to the deepest shadows. Up at the house he could see five indistinct figures grouped about a table, and thought he could hear the faint click of poker chips.

Then, in the small log blacksmith shop, set a little distance apart from the other buildings, Barney caught the brief flare of a match through a crack in the chinking. Toward that building he moved, close enough to catch a whiff of cigarette smoke. Then someone inside said, "Damn the luck!" And boots began pacing slowly back and forth across the dirt floor.

"Vance!" Barney whispered.

The pacing stopped; moved

quickly again, and Vance's voice came from a crack in the logs.

"Barney!" the voice was low, tense. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to save a horse-thief's neck," Barney mumbled.

"Horse-thief—hell!" Vance murmured in a low tone. "Barney, I wasn't tryin' to get away with Mill Iron horses."

"There's no time for lies now," Barney retorted. "I'll go around and unlatch that door, let you out and then——"

"I'll stay here till you listen to me, even if I get my neck stretched for it," Vance replied stubbornly. "Listen to me! I was roundin' up some of McQuade's broncs, like I tried to tell you yesterday morning. Well, I had 'em there in Blind Canyon when Straight Marquard come along with a quart bottle of booze. Like a darned fool, I got dead drunk and . . ."

Vance talked on. Two minutes later Barney was releasing him from a log prison and thrusting the rifle into his hands. Then both of them were making their way toward the ranch house. While Vance walked around to the open window of the room that held the five card players, Barney walked up to the door, stood there looking into that dimly-lit room until big Straight Marquard, who was dealing, happened to glance up—and froze in his chair.

"What's wrong, Straight?" rumbled Thatcher, whose back was turned to the door.

"He's seein' ghosts!" Barney clicked, hand close to his gun.

"You!" Thatcher rasped, turning. "Have you kept that bargain, Chapman? Already?"

"Bargain—hell!" Barney answered. "That was a frame-up, Thatcher. The kind that only you and that card-cheatin' buzzard across the table from you would hatch up. Gettin' a kid drunk, then slippin' your own horses past him into Blind Canyon. Yeah, then trailin' past my camp so I could see you trap him red-handed!"

Thatcher's face paled a little. "You're crazy, Chapman," he croaked hoarsely. "Vance stole them horses, like he's stole others, and he's goin' to swing for it if you don't do——"

"NO, I'm not!" Vance Chapman broke in, resting the barrel of his rifle on the window-sill. "I'm goin' to tell a half-dozen homesteaders what a good friend you are to 'em, Thatcher. And Marquard's goin' to help me prove it."

"Let 'em have it!" bawled Thatcher, rolling off his chair.

Marquard took the cue and made a grab for his gun. But Barney's .45 was streaking up, stabbing fiery prongs into that room, as he defiantly answered the five of Thatcher's men. Leaden slugs tore at the door casing, and Barney could hear them splintering the window sill near his brother. One of Thatcher's punchers tried to leap back to the table from which he had ducked, and knock the lamp over. But Barney put a bullet through his hand, and the man jumped back, howling.

For a few seconds the room rocked to the roar of guns, but over the thunder came loud voices begging for a halt. Thatcher, his gun arm limp from a .30-30 slug fired by Vance, was yelling loudest. A close second was Marquard, who had been hit by two slugs from Barney's .45.

"Leave your guns!" Barney shouted. "Crawl over against that far wall." As his command was obeyed, he glanced across at the open window and said, "You hit, Vance?"

"Just raked through the shoulder, but still able to pull a trigger," came the reply. "And I'm goin' to pull it some more if those skunks don't start spoutin' the truth. How about it, Marquard? Did I steal those Mill Iron horses, or didn't I?"

"No!" bellowed the defeated gambler. "You didn't steal 'em. It was a trap set to ketch your damned fool brother. Thatcher thought he'd do anything to save your hide."

"That's all I want to know," said Barney, smiling at his brother.

"And all I want to know," put in a new voice.

Barney whirled, saw Faye Clark standing there on the porch.

"I knew something was wrong today, Barney." Faye said, her lips trembling. "I didn't go home. I watched you, followed you here. It's been—awful! But I'm glad I came!" Tears glistened on her lashes.

Later, while Faye and the Chapman brothers rode across a starlit mesa enroute to the Clark place, young Vance said, "I'll never break the promise I made you, Barney. Faye here had a long talk with me the other day. I'm homesteadin' next to the Clark place. I've already filed on it, and when it's proved up on—well, it'll be yours and hers, Barney—to kinda help square for all you've done for me."

"Mine and Faye's? How do you know that she——"

"I know it, all right," Vance answered confidentially.

And when the girl reached out to take Barney's hand, he knew it, too; knew that he would never leave this mesa where the future loomed bright for the two Chapmans who were going to work together.

THE END.

THE CHUCK WAGON TRAILERS

"OLD cowboys don't die; they go to Los Angeles," is an old saying, but there are three cities where former cowhands seem to congregate when they are through riding the range—San Antonio, Denver and Los Angeles. Los Angeles claims the greatest population of ex-cowhands, and points to the big enrollment of the Chuck Wagon Trailers Association, whose membership is made up entirely of men who were working cattle on the range prior to 1905.

According to Harry Gant, the president of the organization, it has more than five hundred members. They include men from every Western State where there is, or once was, a cattle range, and there are a number from Canada and Mexico, and even two or three from Australia.

Twice a year, on the nearest Sunday to the twentieth of May and the twentieth of October, the Trailers bring out an old-time chuck wagon that saw plenty of service on the range in days gone by and, with the wagon chock-full of old-time range grub, they hie themselves to a convenient ranch near the city, where they have room to cook, eat, and spread themselves for a big powwow.

At these chuck-wagon dinners, the interested student of the ways of the Old West can get the real low-down on any subject he chooses. Nary a feud, fight or frolic ever occurred in the cow country but what some trailer present at the feed has been on hand to see it.

THE SILVER CONCHA

by JACK STERRETT

The Silver Concha

WHILE waiting, Joe Aborn sat his saddle with as little motion as a sinister bronze statue. Just here the road to Costa plunged down through a slotted ravine to the shallow water of the ford across the Snake. Trapped in the boulder-strewn pocket, the heat of the noon-high sun was merciless. But Aborn was unaware of the heat.

A dead and forgotten cigarette hung to the cowboy's lower lip. His bronzed face was a hard mask, and slitted lids veiled the smoky-gray, smoldering eyes that had given him the nickname of Smoky Aborn. His gaunt body was poised and rigid. Long, work-hardened fingers were tensed on the six-gun that rested on the pommel of the saddle. He had heard the distant rumble of the Costa-Red Bluff stage, for which he was waiting.

The driver yelled hoarsely as the stage racked around the bend and plunged for the drop to the river. Cursing wildly, he threw all his weight on the lines and jammed down on the brake. Horses sliding on their haunches, brake shoes screaming and smoking, the stage lurched to a drunken halt at the very edge of the water.

Heads popped from the stage windows, accompanied by a volley of excited questions. Face white and set, the driver merely jerked his head toward the water while keeping his hands in the air. His eyes glowered at the big boulders that had been rolled into the water to block the ford, then at Smoky's menacing figure, stiffly erect at the side of the road, a red bandanna jerked up over the high bridge of his nose, his smoldering eyes deadly behind the sights of his yawning .45.

"Aw right," Smoky warned in a soft, husky voice as the stage passengers stared at him in the moment's paralysis, "if nobody gets nervous, there won't nobody get hurt. I'd like to see the palms of your hands."

There was something about his voice, as dry as the whir of a rattler, that made them jerk up their hands as though stung. Hastily obedient to his quiet command, they tumbled from the stage and lined up on the road. Quietly he surveyed the huddled knot of men and women, some badly frightened, others defiant. His smoldering, gray gaze swept over them slowly at first, then jerked into a sudden blaze of fury as they stabbed at the driver.

"What the hell!" he ripped out savagely. "I reckoned that Sheriff Marks'd be on this stage! Where is he?"

The driver jerked his head to stare at his passengers with stupefied surprise. His mouth flopped open. "Why, he . . . uh!" He checked himself abruptly. "Uh . . . no. The sheriff didn't come. Just his daughter is along. The sheriff went to Red Bluff last Saturday, but changed his mind about comin' home today. He figgered the girl might as well come right ahead. Said I was to take care of her an' all . . . an' so she—"

The driver's voice faded away as Smoky stared at the girl the man had indicated with a jerk of his thumb. And as he stared, the fury and disappointment he had felt at not trapping the man he had sworn to kill here slowly died, to be replaced by wonder and awe at the beauty of this girl who was that man's daughter.

Hair as black as a raven's wing, face of flawless, cameo beauty, she

stood white and strained, but utterly fearless. Her flashing blue eyes were defiantly challenging as she lifted the perfect flower of her face.

For a charged instant their eyes clashed, clear blue and smoky-gray, and something passed between them that stiffened Smoky as though by electric shock. Involuntarily he swept off his hat.

"Miss, I'm sorry," Smoky said in his low, husky voice, "if I've frightened you. Since your father ain't here, I got no business with any of you, an' you can go in safety. I ain't just a highwayman."

Somehow it seemed important to Smoky that the girl should understand that he was no common gunman. But she said nothing, and the mockery of her soft mouth, the scorn that blazed in her eyes, made him bite his lips.

"Get these folks back on the stage an' drive on," he said harshly to the driver. "You can dodge them boulders. Mosey!" He lifted his bridle to turn away.

"Just a minute! Hold on . . . gun-man!" It was a cold, thin voice, keen and sharp with menace and authority. Smoky twisted back sharply, swiveling his gun with flashing speed. His smoldering eyes stabbed to pick out the speaker and found him—the man he had sworn to kill, fair fight or not!

SHERIFF MARKS was standing behind the stage where he had dropped unseen at the instant that the horses had slid to a halt. Fierce eyes blazed under white eyebrows in an eagle-nosed face, eyes that were leveled behind the sights of a big gun.

Fear of striking a passenger, memory of the girl's haunting face, held Smoky's fire, and the gaunt sheriff edged into the open. His voice was hard, slow and measured.

"Son, lower that gun an' drop it to the ground. I'm thinkin' that you spoke the truth when you said you wasn't no bandit. You got a quarrel with me? Think! Innocent folks might get killed if you an' me throwed lead now. Drop that gun. I'll talk to you."

Smoky's breath whistled sharply between his teeth. His body was tense with hatred for this beak-nosed old lawman. His eyes glared at the band of the battered old Stetson the man wore, a band which bore a circle of odd silver conchas, and from which one of the circlets of carved metal was obviously missing. His nostrils flared. For a breathless instant, hellish, flaming death hung quivering in the balance. Then, again, he glimpsed the girl from the corner of his eyes and read sudden terror for her father in the ashen stillness of her face.

A wild, broken curse slipped suddenly through Smoky's tight lips. "You're a murderer!" he flung down at the gaunt old man. "I meant to give you the lead you deserve. But now . . . aw, hell!"

With a sudden slash of his spurs, Smoky exploded his horse into action, whirled madly and dashed up the ravine in a crazy effort to escape.

"Stop!" the old sheriff bawled.

Bent low over his horse's neck, Smoky paid the warning no heed. He heard the roar of the lawman's gun. He did not hear the girl's sharp cry, nor see the sudden lithe motion with which she ruined her father's aim. In a split second he was out of sight and wildly riding the rimrocks toward the pine-clad hills.

That afternoon Smoky slouched slowly down the street in Costa. His chaps and vest removed and the bandanna which had served him as a mask thrust into a pocket, he felt

secure from chance recognition by any of the passengers of the stage who might be abroad. It had been a long time since he had been in Costa. Nobody should know him, for he had been a kid when he had left.

Smoky's scowling gaze was directed downward at his boots as he shuffled along the splintered boards of the sidewalk. He had about made up his mind to hunt up Sheriff Marks again and have things out with him. No man allows another man to murder his father without some effort to square accounts.

Slow, bitter thoughts churned Smoky's mind. Marks had killed his father, Cliff Aborn, all right. That fact was proven by the concha missing from the lawman's hatband. He should have shot the sheriff without mercy, as he had intended doing. But there had been that girl.

Aimlessly, sightlessly dawdling along the street, Smoky was suddenly halted by the sound of light, quick footsteps. He caught his breath as his gaze shot up. It was she, the sheriff's daughter, color bright in her cheeks, her eyes flashing as she blocked his way.

Smoky flashed his hand toward his hat. He halted the gesture jerkily, cursing beneath his breath, and switched his eyes away. But it was too late. She had already recognized him. He brought his smoky gaze back in defiance of her challenging look.

Her lips parted, and in a low voice said: "The highwayman himself! Did you dream that, if I ever saw you again, I would fail to know you? It wouldn't have made any difference how you disguised yourself!"

For a long, silent moment Smoky stared at her with direct intensity. Quick color flooded her cheeks, and he lowered his gaze in apology. "Miss, I reckon I should've knowed that it'd be this way. As for me—just the sound of your feet on the sidewalk told me it was you!" He bit his lips at his own boldness as he lifted his eyes again.

She looked quickly away, then back again. "I think I know who you are. But why do you hate my father? Why did you name him murderer?"

Smoky's lips went white and thin. "Because," he said stonily, "he killed my dad without givin' 'im a chance to draw. Without proof, he named 'im a cattle rustler an' shot 'im down in cold blood!"

"That's not true!" the girl exclaimed. She glanced around, then led him beyond a corner to the quiet of a side street. Her words came in a rush. "You're Cliff Aborn's son, Smoky. My father guessed it from something in your manner. He was sure of it when we got to town and heard the news of your father's death. You must believe me. My father didn't kill yours. Cliff Aborn was shot sometime during the day last Saturday—when dad was on the stage on his way to Red Bluff!"

Smoky stiffened. He stared at her in bewilderment. It was true! He remembered now. The stage driver had made that statement, too, and without any knowledge of who Smoky was or why he was holding up the stage. Smoky grunted and pulled a carved silver concha from an envelope in his shirt pocket.

"How do you explain the fact," he asked hoarsely, "that this was found near my dad's dead body?"

THE girl's eyes widened as she stared at the concha. The back of one hand suppressed the trembling of her lips. "I don't know. That's dad's, of course. But

he didn't do the shooting. Somebody is trying to frame him!"

Smoky stared at her as he slowly placed the concha in the letter again and replaced it in his pocket. Somewhere in the back of his head a dim thought, something important that should have been obvious to him before, was fighting to find its way out. His voice was slow as he labored with the effort of bringing that thought clear.

"Miss, I been away in Mesa Grande for nigh six years a-buildin' a spread of my own. In all that time I ain't been back to Costa. What do you know about this man who's been my dad's partner for the last three years?"

"Red Clawson?" The girl's voice turned heavy with distaste. "I don't like him. Neither does dad. And your father had lately suspected him of cheating him, of falsifying his cattle tallies and rustling on the side. The purpose of my father's trip to Red Bluff was to make inquiries into Red's past in your father's behalf."

Smoky's face tightened, became grim and black. "You reckon," he asked, "that Red could have discovered that dad an' your father was searchin' his trail? You reckon that such would've been reason enough for him to kill my dad an' sick me onto your father?"

Her face was still and white. "That's pure theory, but—it makes sense. Red sent for you?"

"Yeah!" Smoky grunted savagely, and swift comprehension flamed in his eyes. "Red writ me a letter, sent the proof all laid out to make me shootin' wild. He sent me this concha, knowin' I'd see its mates on your father's hat. He even suggested that I meet the stage on which your father'd be comin' to Costa! But I know what happened now."

He reached out a hand to her shoulder. "By Heaven, miss—thank God you was there this mornin' to change my mind about killin' your dad there an' then! Where is he now?"

The girl's look was bewildered. "He's gone to see Red Clawson. But what—"

With a sudden explosive movement Smoky leaped past her and ran toward the main street. He paid no heed to the sharp cry that followed him. A seething madness was in his brain as he shot wildly around the corner and leaped for his hitch-racked horse.

Dusk filled the valley which cradled the Boxed A Ranch. Smoky sped wildly down the road and around a sharp bend which preceded the trail's swift descent to the floor of the valley. His sweat-covered, dusty face was masklike with deadly purpose. Racing around the bend, he yanked back so savagely on the bridle that his horse skidded on his haunches in a shower of stones and dirt.

Down from their horses and facing each other in the road were the eagle-nosed, white-headed sheriff, empty hands above his head, and a burly, red-bearded man who was leveling a cocked .45. The hammer of that gun was almost in the very act of falling, and the gaunt old sheriff was just beginning the wild, hopeless gesture of dropping his hand to his own gun.

THE smashing explosiveness of Smoky's arrival held them, for a split instant, paralyzed. In that instant Smoky's spurs lashed savagely back again and the lunging horse leaped madly ahead.

Red Clawson had time only to yank himself around on his heels. His heavy face writhed with hate

and terror. His gun bellowed, spewing lead and flame, and Smoky felt the hammering yank of a slug. Then Clawson was battered under the horse's hoofs with a choking scream.

Smoky was over and away. Even as he whirled, his own gun in his fist, he heard the blasting finale of the sheriff's weapon as, still fighting, the mangled Clawson tried to raise his gun for another shot.

Smoky and Sheriff Marks stared at each other across the twitching body. The grim old lawman nodded. "Yeah," he growled, "I knew I was right. Knew it was you all along. You should've stopped an' talked to me, Smoky, an' none of this would've happened. I even tried to wing you when you hightailed, you stubborn hellion. Well"—his eyes dropped to Clawson's motionless form—"I was comin' out to look into things when Clawson dropped on me here an' took me by surprise. I reckon he knew, when he saw me comin' instead of you, that somethin' had gone wrong with his dirty plans. Clawson lied to you about your father's death?"

"He sure did that," Smoky muttered through set lips. Slowly he fished the crumpled letter from his shirt. "I'm sorry I come within a shadow of shootin' you this noon."

Marks shrugged. "Forget it. An' you can tell me your story later. You're hurt!"

"It's nothin' but a shoulder burn," Smoky grunted. He held out the silver concha. "This is what had me fooled about you."

Marks smiled as he took the silver medallion, taking off his hat and pointing to the empty place on the band. "Your father made this band for me," he said with a shadow in his eyes for the passing of a friend. "He was some proud of the design on the conchas, an' he reckoned to make somethin' similar for hisself. He borrowed this a month ago. But how did you tumble that I was innocent of your dad's death, that Clawson had framed that onto me?

Smoky lifted his chest with a sigh. He felt very tired, and, somehow, sleepy. The blood he was losing from his shoulder was weakening him. That wound was more than a mere burn. He held out the crumpled envelope in his fingers.

"Clawson sent for me by mail," Smoky said slowly, "a-claimin' that you had murdered dad. Only . . . I just found out this afternoon that dad was killed on Saturday, while Red's letter was postmarked Friday —*the day before!*"

For an instant Marks' face went white with anger. Then Smoky lurched and almost fell from the saddle. Marks leaped to his side.

"Steady, boy! We'll be down to the ranch in a minute an' I'll send a hand to fetch a sawbones an' Ada. Ada's my daughter. I reckon she's the best nurse the Lord ever made."

Smoky grinned slowly down at the anxious face of the old man. So her name was Ada! The world was spinning with a slow, drunken motion, and he batted his eyes, but continued to grin. Sheriff Marks had sure spoken the truth. For him—there never *could* be a better nurse than Ada.

THE END.

WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

By JOHN NORTH

> If you're interested in this new frontier and its possibilities, write to John North. Send a stamped, self-addressed envelope along with your inquiry.

I GATHER from the number of requests I have received that everybody in the country is interested in getting some of that free farmland up in Alaska. But it also seems that everybody still thinks of Alaska as a place covered with ice and Eskimos. Few people seem to be able to comprehend the size and the conditions up there.

For instance, you folks in the Southwest can't imagine men raising crops on ground where the sunshine drives the thermometer up to well past a hundred degrees—New Mexico weather—while a few feet underground the soil is frozen solid.

But you ask, what will grow up there? How do the farmers endure the cold? Well, almost any kind of staple farm product, except corn, tomatoes and cucumbers, will grow outdoors there. It's a great wheat and grain country, and ideal for dairying and raising hogs and chickens.

And how do you endure the cold? Well, listen to this! In Sitka, Alaska, there never has been a week *in winter* when the temperature was as cold as it has been in Minnesota, in New York City, and in Washington,

D. C., which is considered pretty far south. And in summer it has never been as hot in Sitka as it very often is in those places! That's a pretty mild year-round temperature.

Up in the Tanana Valley, where there is so much free farmland, winters are moderately cold. But even here they have at least a hundred and twenty growing days between frosts.

Now that is about the average number of growing days in the northern and middle United States. But that isn't the half of it. It's the number of hours of sunlight crops get that regulates their growth. Where down here you may get twelve or more hours of sunlight during those days, in Alaska you will get up to *twenty-two hours* of sunlight a day. Vegetables therefore will grow about twice as fast, which, incidentally, means less work cultivating them.

Another important factor in their quick growth is the matter of water. Here a crop must either wait for enough rainfall or be irrigated. But in Alaska there is the frozen soil underneath. The sun is slowly melting that all summer long, and the crop roots drink it up as fast as they need it. There's a constant supply without any work attached to it.

There is only two percent of Alaska's land that is constantly under snow and ice. There are over thirty-two million acres that can be cleared and cropped, and an equal amount that can be satisfactorily grazed.

And the government is begging you to come and take this land!

A man can go there and get a home free, raise his crops with more success and less work than elsewhere, and then in his spare time step right out on his own land, or within a few miles, and bring in a deer or bear for his meat house, kill all the ducks and game birds he wants, go to his stream and bring in enough salmon to can for the winter needs of his family. And during the long winter months he can hew down timber on his farm to build barns and other buildings.

In other words, he can dig in and make a home in this new frontier like his grandfather did in the West a generation or two before him.

In the Tanana Valley, where there is so much free land, and where there is great agricultural activity, including a government experiment station, they have a farmer's coöperative market that handles all the produce, has its own flour mill and storage plants, and buys your equipment for you on a money-saving basis.

So you don't have to go looking for markets when you get your crops harvested. The markets are waiting for you, and the price you get is always high.

The winter is the time to plan your next spring's activities. Start investigating the possiblities of Alaska right now!

We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

MINES AND MINING

By

J. A. THOMPSON

THERE'S news this week for desert prospectors, and all you fellows anxious to try a hand at winning gold with a dry washer. A new gold strike has recently been made in Nevada. Reports are that those on the ground are cleaning up five dollars a day and better, mostly in nuggets, with small hand-operated dry washers.

Other details include the following: The region up in Pershing County in the north central part of the State is accessible by car. General elevation of the gold-bearing gravels runs from four thousand to forty-five hundred feet above sea level. The ground is free of big boulders. This, coupled with the coarse nature of the gold, makes it ideal for dry washing, and fairly easy to work.

There is from ten inches to two feet of overburden that has to be removed in most places, and then your gravel, with its flakes and nuggets of yellow metal, is laid bare for working. Les Alger, who made a strike there not so long ago, got himself four and a half ounces of gold in two days.

The find is new and the strike is young yet, but we understand that about thirty dry washers have already been set up in the neighborhood. Additional strikes may be made by the time this magazine reaches you. The general region of these new finds is a sector that has been described from time to time right along in the columns of this department—the country around Scossa and Placeritas and the old Rabbit Hole placers.

Nevada Bill, one of our old-time prospector readers just told us about the strike while we were in Texas heading West for the mining country. He has already looked the new field over, and is optimistic for its future. We'll let him tell it.

"Charley Owens was the first to do some prospecting out there. He found gold and told Charles E. Dice and L. D. Manning of Sulphur about it. The latter two were interested. They went out and prospected the ground thoroughly, surveyed six sections which they obtained for themselves and are at present leasing this land to prospectors on a ten-percent-royalty basis.

"Les Alger made the second strike there, and I happened to hear about it in the following way. One evening

a short time ago I met Alger's younger brother here in town. He was on his way out to the new discovery and told me about his brother's find. When I went out, O. H. Oleson was with me, and the ground impressed him so much that he staked a one-hundred-and-sixty-acre claim and put two men to work right away. I saw Mr. Olesen today and asked him how he was getting on. He said he was pleased, and that his men were making better than wages right along."

Ordinarily we don't publish partner requests in this department, but we are making an exception in Nevada's case. Bill needs a partner with a car and a grubstake to throw in with him working his claim in this new gold field. If you think you would like to join up with this old-timer or want to learn more about his frank proposition, sit down and write him now. Send a stamp, or stamped envelope with your letter to Nevada Bill, and inclose it in an envelope addressed to the Mines and Mining Department, Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. We will see that it is forwarded to Bill pronto.

There is plenty of food for thought, too, in Robert Ames' letter that just came in. Ames went prospecting in Kingman, Arizona, a few years ago. He's still there, for he made a success of it. He says, "Mining is certainly a grand game. Consider, for instance, that in these elsewhere hard times our per capita production in minerals last year was six hundred and forty dollars, three quarters of it in new gold. For Arizona alone the per capita was a hundred and sixty dollars.

"I feel sure there are thousands who could do what I am doing, but their hearts fail them when they tie into the long uphill grind that is necessary in getting ahead from a ground-level start in any business. From figures by Dr. Scott only one person in twenty-four has the ability to make a job for others, so every new prospector, or man making a success of mining, affords a new source for the creation of jobs that are so much needed today.

"Sometimes I wonder if your readers actually realize the economic importance of mining today, and the good that results not only to themselves, but to others through new mineral discoveries and their adequate development. All of which hooks up quite definitely with the good and excellent work your department and Western Story Magazine is doing in assisting people to get started prospecting on their own, and in giving advice and needed information to those of us already in the field."

Well, thanks a lot, Mr. Ames. That sets a pretty high mark for us to live up to. But we'll do our best. And continue to call 'em as we see 'em when it comes to all mining queries that are sent in.

We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

The HOLLOW TREE

Conducted by HELEN RIVERS

WELL, folks, the New Year has started and once again we've all made lots of very fine resolutions. There's one that probably heads all your lists—to make as many new friends as possible throughout the year—and it's one resolution you won't break, we'll wager. Begin right now to put it into effect by dropping a few lines to this New Englander who writes:

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a stamp collector and have a good many I would like to trade. They're good, clean specimens and I'd like to swap them with all foreign correspondents no matter where they live (none in the United States). I will try to please those who care to join my circle of friendly traders, so come on, you stamp boys and girls, let's see who has the most initiative. I have lots of time to answer all who are honest-to-goodness stamp collectors—Ernest G. Ayer, Billington Street, Plymouth, Massachusetts

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Zelma is a Scotch-Irish lass with a whole passel of interests—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a Scotch-Irish girl, nineteen years young, and I would like to hear from young folks everywhere who are interested in science, philosophy, aviation, poetry, writing, photography and almost anything else under the sun. I am a lover of the great outdoors and Mother Nature—Zelma Barnes, La Pryor, Texas

---

This Canadian is a sports enthusiast—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-two years old and would like to correspond with boys and girls from seventeen to twenty-nine. I am interested in all sports, especially swimming. I will exchange photographs and promise to answer all letters—Bert Milner, 5282 Queen Mary Road, Apt. No. 1, Snowden, Montreal, Canada

---

If you want a quick answer, send your snapshot too—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am sixteen years old, living on a ranch in the northern part of the State, and I would like to have lots of Pen Pals. I enjoy all kinds of sports, but horseback riding is my favorite. I would especially like to hear from cowboys and cowgirls, but everyone is welcome, so come on, all you Pals, and write to me. I promise to answer all letters, but those who send snapshots will be answered first—Bertha Zimmerman, Ahsahka, Idaho

---

England is represented this week by a "speed demon"—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a sixteen-year-old boy living in London and I would like plenty of Pen Pals all over the world. My hobbies are cycle racing, touring and reading. I promise to answer all letters—Lon Newbury, 129 Hillingdon Street, Walworth, S. E. 17, London, England

---

Write to this widow from the Lone Star State—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a widow forty-two years old and am considered neat and attractive. I would like to hear from pen friends from anywhere and everywhere—Ada Leona Hawkins, 1913 Chenevert, Houston, Texas

---

Some worth-while, pleasing Pals wanted here—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-eight years old, fond of writing and would appreciate receiving letters from Pen Pals from the western part of our fine country. I am interested in amateur photography and would like to exchange some shots with others interested in this hobby. Please don't fail me for I'm anxious to have some worth-while and pleasing friends—Charles W. Gessner, Jr., 3032 North Fifth Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Calling all women living outside of Australia—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young married woman living on a sheep station here in Australia and I would love to hear from any young or elderly woman, married or single, who lives across the sea—it doesn't matter exactly where. My hobbies are collecting snaps and stamps which I will exchange. I am also fond of outdoor sports, especially horseback riding. It is very lonely way out here on the vast open plains, so please someone write to me—Mrs. John Lomax, "Mascot" Station, Mungindi, N. S. Wales, Australia

A New Yorker wants to hear from you Western hombres—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am fifteen years old and would like to correspond with a boy living in one of the Western States, if possible. If not, anyone is welcome to write—Albert Bailey, R. R. No. 3, Geneva, New York

Jacqueline is almost sweet sixteen—

Dear Miss Rivers:

How are my chances of getting in the Hollow Tree? I will soon be sixteen and am a junior in high school. I would like to hear from boys and girls anywhere in the United States and all foreign countries and will also exchange snapshots. My favorite sports are horseback riding and swimming—Jacqueline Porter, Gorden Prairie, Illinois

Private Curtis will answer all letters—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to hear from Pen Pals of either sex living anywhere in the United States. I am a soldier in the United States army stationed in Panama. I'll gladly answer all letters and exchange snapshots with those who care to—Private Claude Curtis, Battery 1, Fourth Coast Artillery, Fort Amador, Canal Zone

Want some inside information on how movies are made?

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a girl fourteen years old and live in a small town in San Fernando Valley. Quite a few motion-picture companies come here to take pictures so I can tell you something about how they are made. My hobby is collecting odd perfume bottles, and my favorite sport is baseball. I want to hear from girls and boys oll over the world, so come on, all you ink-slingers, keep my postman busy—and please don't hold my age against me—Emily Peters, Box 204, Sunland, California

Bill belongs to the Coast Guard and should have some interesting tales to spin—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young boy, twenty years old, serving my first enlistment with the coast guard. I would like to hear from boys and girls all over the world and I would especially like to hear from some living in Georgia. I enjoy all sports and like to sing Western songs as well as popular ones. I will answer all letters, so come on, girls and boys, and get those pens hot—Bill Howard, U. S. Patrol Boat Nike C. G., Pascagoula, Mississippi

High-school students listen here—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am going to high school and would like to hear from other high-school students living in England, Texas and Arizona especially, but everyone else is welcome. I like to hike, swim and go to the movies and I will exchange snapshots with anyone who sends me theirs—Ann Fiore, 121 Locust Street, Waterbury, Connecticut

We'll bet there isn't anything this Pen Pal can't tell you about—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am thirty years old and would like to hear from anyone but especially those living in the West. I'm a collector of rocks, stamps, coins and Indian relics and a lover of the great outdoors. Whenever possible, I go on a camping trip and hunt, trap and fish. I have also worked in a store, a lumber camp, a factory and on a farm, so I can tell any Pen Pals interested quite a bit about those different kinds of work. Come on everybody, I'll be waiting—C. Jackson Baker, Joy, Illinois

Anna Belle collects letters as a hobby—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am sixteen years old and am a junior in Stilwell High School. As hobbies I collect charms, pictures and save all the letters I receive. I enjoy all outdoor sports especially basketball, swimming, hiking or horseback riding. I would like to hear from folks from far and near and will try to answer all letters—Anna Belle Beaty, R. F. D. No. 4, Stilwell, Oklahoma

Calling all Westerners—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am fourteen years old and live on a large lake about forty miles from San Antonio, although that's where I receive my mail. I would especially like to hear from girls living out here in the West and here's hoping I get lots of answers.—Ruth Segreaves, 1701 N. Laredo Street, San Antonio, Texas

Vivian certainly has some varied interests—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Could you put me in touch with some Pen Pals? I am sixteen years old and interested in chemistry, history, archæology, traveling and cowboys. I should like to correspond with people of all ages from all over the world.—Vivian Carlisle, 803 N. Main Street, Buchanan, Michigan

Oscar will be a sincere pal—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Will the ol' Holla Tree help me find a Pal? I am a bachelor, forty-five years old, and crave some friends for companionship. I own a little home here with eighty acres of land. I will exchange snaps and be a sincere correspondent. —Oscar Nolen, Rt. No. 2, Waterloo, Alabama

MISSING DEPARTMENT

There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

While it will be better to use your name in the notices, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to anyone who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

GATTERFIELD, EMIL—His mother, Mrs. Dorothy Gatterfield, last heard from him in 1898 at which time he was living in New York and studying music. He had a brother, Adolbert, who was last heard of in San Francisco shortly before the earthquake. Emil, if alive, would be over seventy years old. If anyone has any information concerning his whereabouts, please get in touch with his niece, Mrs. P. J. Salvage, Rapid View, Saskatchewan, Canada.

LUCAS, JUNIOR and ELVIN—They are my brothers and were put in an orphanage at Timberville, Virginia. They were later adopted by someone and I cannot find them. Junior is fifteen and Elvin is ten or twelve. If anyone knows their whereabouts, please write to their brother, Richard Lucas, Mount Sidney, Virginia.

CROLEY, BILL—When last heard of he was in Kentucky. Any information concerning his whereabouts would be greatly appreciated by his cousin Will's daughter. Write to Alta Ferguson, 438 North Miller Street, Vinita, Oklahoma.

MURPHY, CORNELIUS JOHN—He was born in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, fifty-one years ago. He is Scotch-Irish, five feet five inches tall, weighs one hundred and sixty-five pounds, has dark hair which is turning gray, blue-gray eyes, high cheekbones and a ruddy complexion. His trigger finger on his right hand is crooked and he has a star tattooed on both shoulders and a heart and clasped hands on his forearm. He's had fifteen years' sea experience and was in the army for five years. He was last seen fifteen years ago when he was at Camp Dodge, Des Moines, Iowa. "Daddy, write to us. We miss you and want you to come home no matter what has happened. We love you—Jada, Margaret, Ruth, John and Cornelius, 122 Singleterry Street, Baton Rouge, Louisiana."

CLARK, PAUL—He is a very dear friend of mine and has been missing since 1937. When last heard from he was in Kentucky. I would appreciate any information you can give me as to his whereabouts. Write to Miss Veta Turner, Iola, Texas.

D'AVIGNON, RALPH JOSEPH—He is our son who left home just twenty years ago on Thanksgiving Day. He would be thirty-four years old now. If still alive, we wish he would come back home or write to us. If anyone has any information concerning his whereabouts, please communicate with Mr. and Mrs. Joseph E. D'Avignon, Route No. 1, Post Office Box 23, Center, Colorado.

PINAGER, THELMA and MARY HAYES—They are two friends of mine and were last seen in Toledo, Iowa. Thelma was about five feet, four inches tall, weighed one hundred and eight and had dark hair and fair complexion. I heard that she moved to Des Moines, Iowa. Mary was about the same height and weight as Thelma but she had light hair. They are both about nineteen years old. If anyone has any information concerning their present whereabouts, please communicate with Vernon J. Shireman, 150 Edith Avenue, Dubuque, Iowa.

FLATAU, NATHAN—He was last heard from in Albany, New York, in 1895. Any information concerning his whereabouts will be greatly appreciated by a very dear friend of his. Write to Roy Hargrave, 255 East Seventy-eighth Street, New York City.

CAZEL, EDWIN E.—He has been missing since November, 1933. Since that time his wife has passed on, leaving an only child who is very anxious to hear from his father. His sister heard that he was in Berkeley, California, but, not having his address, was unable to locate him. If anyone has any information that will lead to his whereabouts, will they please write to Mrs. Frank McCann, 3535 Medill Avenue, Chicago, Illinois?

CLAYBORN, LOUISE—She is my sister and it has been three years since I have heard from her. If anyone who sees this ad knows her, I would appreciate it if they would give her my address or write to me. When last heard from she was in California. Norman Clayborn, CCC Company 5705, Camp Bungalow, Pierce, Idaho.

MILLER, MRS. EMMA BOLING—She was last heard from seven years ago in Ashley, Kentucky. She wrote us a card saying she expected to see us all soon and we have not heard from her since. She has dark brown hair and brown eyes. If anyone knows her whereabouts, please write to her mother, Mrs. Florence Boling, Cordova, North Carolina.

ATTENTION—I would like to hear from any U. S. Marine who did duty at the American Embassy Guard, Peiping, China, from December,

1936, to December, 1937. Jesse S. Riley, Post Office Box 96, Fort Monroe, Virginia.

WALKER, E. I. (CURLEY)—He was last heard from in May, at which time he was in Ogden, Utah, and a month or so later from Arizona. If anyone knows his whereabouts please communicate with Dorothy Walker, care of C. H. R., Route No. 1, Bigelow, Arkansas.

MORRIS, SAMUEL—He was last heard of in 1928 when he lived with his wife and mother at 1155 East Fifty-fourth Street, Chicago, Illinois. I lived with them in 1926 and 1927 at 5400 South Parkway, Chicago, Illinois. I left there in March, 1927, and left with them some personal belongings. These belongings are of value to me only and I would like to get them back but cannot find Mr. Morris. If anyone knows his whereabouts, will they please write to me. He was at one time employed by the Illinois Central Railroad in Chicago. Samuel Woessner, CCC Company 2374 D. G. 93, Keating, Oregon.

PARILLA, MICHAEL—Please write and let us know where you are. Uncle has left you some money. You don't have to come for it if you don't want to. We will forward it to your address. Please write to your brother-in-law, Mr. Joseph Coslosky, Courtright Avenue, Pringle, Pennsylvania.

NOTICE—I would like to hear from my father's relatives. His name was Sidney Grant Stoops and he died about thirty years ago. I would also like to hear from the playmates I had in Minneapolis, Minnesota, when I lived at 627 Washington Avenue thirty-five years ago. I would like to hear from the Elmer Patwell family and Ida, Rosie, Ben, Louie and Izzy Shapiro whose father had a store on Washington Avenue. Write to Hazel Stoops in care of the Missing Department, Western Story Magazine.

VEACH, JAMES (TUDY)—When last heard of he was in Charleston, Illinois. He is twenty-eight or thirty years old, six feet tall and has dark hair. "Tudy, do you still remember the good times we had in Casey, Illinois, about eight or nine years ago? For old times' sake, look me up or write. I have not forgotten you." Or if anyone knows his whereabouts write to "Babe" in care of the Missing Department, Western Story Magazine.

KENNEDY, DELIA—She came to New York in 1927 from Tullaheady, Menagh County, Tipperary, Ireland. If anyone knows her whereabouts, please write to her old friend, "D. J. McD." in care of the Missing Department, Western Story Magazine.

HURLEY, VIVIAN GERALD—She was living at 3634 Delganey Street, Denver, Colorado, when last heard of. She is thirty-two years old, five feet, four inches tall and weighs one hundred and fifteen pounds. She has brown hair. If anyone knows her whereabouts, please write to "B. G. R." in care of the Missing Department, Western Story Magazine.

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PICTURE OF THE MONTH

Here's your opportunity to obtain FREE a series of colorful framing reproductions of striking *Western Story* covers. Simply fill out and send in together FOUR coupons, each clipped from consecutive issues of *Western Story Magazine*. The Picture of the Month for your latest coupon will be sent. Start now! Clip this coupon and save for your handsome **Picture of the Month** collection.

EDITOR, WESTERN STORY
79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Name.. Age.........

Address..Jan. 7th issue

Here are the names of the stories I liked best in this issue:

First.............................. Third..............................

Second.............................. Fourth..............................

Continued from page 74

Just so good loggers can look at you and say: 'There goes the last of the man-killers.' "

THE timbers were slowly spreading. Drake redoubled his efforts. The jam was moving faster. White water was showing. No rock in the Hellgate could stop the drive now.

With a mighty surge of power, Drake opened the space another foot. Slack, with a tortured grimace, pulled his mashed leg out. Dropping his peevee, Drake reached down and grabbed him by the shirt collar. Then, as if by a prearranged signal, the entire log mass broke up. Drake made a wild lunge at one of the biggest logs, but his calks failed to hold. The next moment he was in the icy water.

Throwing one arm over a passing fir, he drew Slack's head above the surface. They were in the full force of the stream, and were speeding into the next narrow strip of white water. Drake fought his way from one log to another. He had to make the shore before they struck the rapids or they would both be drowned in the swirling water.

Then the log he was holding spun quickly and he lost his grip. The icy water closed over his head. When he came up again he saw loggers on a giant fir. Strong hands reached down and clutched him.

Complete exhaustion swept over him. Dimly he remembered being lifted ashore. His full senses didn't return until he found himself lying on the river bank. A group of loggers were standing over him. Peewee Potter knelt beside him.

"Feeling all right now, feller?" the bullcook inquired.

Drake nodded and he sat up weakly. Then he looked at the others. "The drive going through?"

"It sure is," said one of the loggers. "And there's a crazy bunch of river hogs ridin' her tail."

"Where's Slack?" Drake asked next.

"They've taken him to town," Peewee replied. "His leg's in bad shape. But he'll likely be back soon poundin' hell out of us."

Drake looked into the weather-beaten face of the old man. "No, Peewee, Slack isn't coming back, nor any more like him. The days of Slack Malone and Moose Olson and the rest of that kind are passed so far as this outfit is concerned."

Peewee glanced up at the others. Then he looked back at Drake. "You sure you're feelin' all right? I mean in the head?"

Drake smiled wearily. "I'm not crazy, Peewee—although I might have been out there on the jam when I kept Slack from getting what was coming to him. I always hoped I'd get the chance to settle Joe Dawson's score. Joe and I were pals for years in the woods. That was before I went into the main office in Seattle."

"The main office?" Peewee queried, staring.

Drake nodded. "I'm the new boss up there. I wanted to settle with Slack and at the same time get a slant on the real conditions down here before I let anyone know who I was."

Peewee Potter stood up and ran gnarled fingers through his thin hair.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he murmured. "The big boss rides the Hellgate on a toothpick—and I bin thinking they had softies down there in the main office!"

THE END

Arizona Ranger

Continued from page 90

say I felt uneasy, and not tell him why."

Butch swung his big legs over the side of the bed and stretched lazily.

"Wish you'd tell me! It's morning now, and nothing happened, only that both of us lost half our night's sleep. Why, we prowled all over last night, an' didn't even see that Felipe feller. He wasn't in town at all."

"That's exactly it. If I'd seen him here last night, looking like he was on business, I wouldn't have worried."

Butch was pulling on his boots. But for them, he had slept fully dressed. He grunted disgustedly.

"Clint, I don't sabe you. I still claim that if Tex got a knife stuck in him here it would be the best thing could happen for yore plans."

"It would ruin them!" Clint said earnestly. "I'd have to give up and quit the country. No, I won't tell you why. There's some things you wouldn't like—at first. Come on. Let's slip out the window so nobody can notice us."

"Oh, all right! But this shore is a lot o' fuss, an' all because you didn't like the way Don Luis smiled!"

Clint went first, and Butch followed slowly, not anxious to humor him in this nonsense. The *cantina* above which they had found rooms stood all to itself near the middle of the village, a wide space of deep sand around it. It was the only two-story building in the village. They dropped to the flat roof of a shed, and from there to the ground.

"No, no—not the main street!" Clint pulled Butch in another direction. "Quiet, now!"

They took their spurs off and slipped down the middle of a narrow street with hardly a sound, two gray shadows. They almost fell over a burro sleeping in the deep, sandy dust. They turned a corner and came to the corral. It was walled with adobe. There was no timber in that barren little valley, and no money to buy timber. Butch glanced over the wall.

"Well, the horses are all right. Can you catch yores without ropin' him?"

"Listen!"

CLINT threw up his hand warningly. From out on the rutted, narrow road came the clatter of many hoofs moving in a swift trot.

"*Soldados!*" grunted Butch in surprise.

"Down! Hide!"

They slipped quickly over the wall and crouched behind it. The clatter swept close, and with a jingle of big spurs the first horsemen rode past, gray and shadowy against the sky. More and more followed. Clint estimated that there were about thirty, but there might have been more. Then they were gone, riding swiftly toward the center of the village, and the fine dust of their passing was settling over Clint and Butch.

"*Soldados,*" repeated Butch.

They heard a cautious squeak of a hinge, and turned to see a sombreroed figure running quickly toward a horse in the corral. The horse dodged off, and in following him the man almost bumped into Clint.

"*Quien es?*" Clint demanded quickly, his hand on his gun butt.

The man jerked back a step, gasping, and his hands shot up on both sides of the big hat.

"Don't shoot me!" he begged in

quick peon dialect. "I am a friend —a good friend of Pedro Duran! All in this pueblo are the good friends of Pedro Duran!"

Clint stared. Here was a nice mess! Duran was not the most powerful bandit in Sonora, but he did not come far from being the most dreaded, he and his murderous crew.

"Well, I'm no friend of his—and if you were you wouldn't be so anxious to get your horse out of here before that gang saw it."

The man was trembling.

"But, señor, Pedro is the *muy fino*—"

"The devil he is! Quick, Butch, the horses."

But long before they had the four saddled, the Mexican was disappearing toward the open country. He was riding bareback. He had not even waited for his saddle.

"Hurry up, Butch! You lead this one."

Butch asked no questions. He swung up, and trotted fast but quietly after Clint, whose back was disappearing in the darkness. Straight out of the village went Clint, and then circled around it. Down in the main arroyo was a withered-looking little clump of mesquite which they had passed the evening before as they came to Cinco Santos. Clint, who had a good head for strange country, found it quickly. He rode straight into it, leading the other horse.

"Tie 'em here. Let's hurry back."

"Back!"

There was light enough now to see that Butch was staring at him in disbelief.

"Hurry, man!" Clint said impatiently. "We got to get Tex out of that place, get him home safe!"

"To hell with Tex—the skunk! Come on, let's light out."

Clint did not even stop to answer. He had the two horses tied now, and he was running back toward the village. He felt to make sure that both his guns were loose in the holsters. He had gone only about a hundred yards when he heard a shout behind him.

"Wait for me, Clint!"

Furious at the noise, Clint stopped and turned. Butch came running up heavily, panting.

"You . . . you blamed fool! Clint, yo're the biggest— Oh, let's go!"

"Slower, Butch! If you get too much out of wind you can't shoot straight."

THEY could see the *cantina* building looming up taller than the rest. It was easy to find their way to it in the incresing light. Presently they were crouched at the rear of a house across the street.

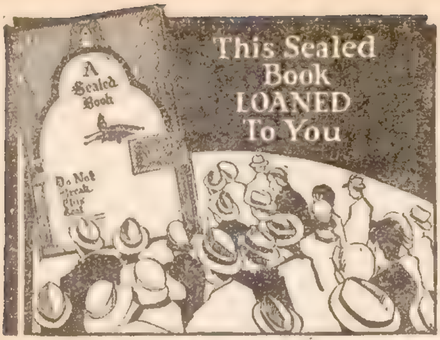
Clint jerked off his hat and peered cautiously through the window above him. He could see men hurrying back and forth in the main street outside. He could also see the outline of heads at the window, within, peering out.

He nudged Butch, and they moved toward the door. He tried it cautiously. It was bolted on the inside.

"Break it in," he whispered.

Butch glared at him, and backed off a pace or two. He came lunging sidewise, and his huge shoulder smashed into the door like a battering-ram. The door, which needed only a shove to move it, collapsed from its hinges, and Butch went sprawling on the floor. But Clint was inside the room before anybody could turn. Both his guns were out.

"Throw 'em up!" he ordered tersely.



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"Oh, señor!" a woman's voice babbled almost incoherently. "We are the good friends of Señor Pedro! Do not kill us, señor!"

"Shut up! Back against that wall, and stay there."

There was a man, a woman and four children. Now that their first surprise was over, they showed the stolid fatalism of their race. If they were to be killed as they stood lined up there, they were to be killed, and complaining about it would not help. Man and woman stood with their backs to the bare adobe of their little room, and even the children, at a word from their mother, got into line.

Suddenly Clint realized what this must mean to them—to be lined up against an adobe wall. Poor devils!

"I won't hurt you," he said quickly. "We don't belong to that gang."

The man answered with that gentle, sad politeness of his people, "We thank you, señor, for not killing us."

A sudden, dull shot roared across the street. It was in the *cantina* building. Clint whirled. A burst of shots followed, all in some room.

Holding his breath, Clint kept his eyes glued on the window that he knew belonged to Tex's room. The daylight had grown strong enough now that he could see one pane broken from the small window. It had been intact the night before. Not another sound came. Clint spoke without turning.

"Butch, I . . . I reckon they got him."

He heard a heavy grunt of approval from behind, where Butch was guarding the rear door. Nothing could have suited Butch better.

"Wait, there he is! There he is!" Clint dashed his own window open and brought his face up into sight. He was beckoning hastily with his gun barrel. A burst of rifle fire rattled from the street. Clint could see little pieces of the adobe wall oppo-

site come spinning down to the ground. It amazed him that some of them were so far from the window, though he well knew what bad shots most Mexicans were.

BOTH Tex's guns were spitting furiously. Men were dropping in the street outside. They were breaking, running, unaccustomed to such deadly fire as this. There came a crash against the outside door as somebody tried to get in. From back in the room, Butch's revolver roared, and Clint heard a sliding sound against the door, and a groan.

Clint whirled. He darted a hand into his pocket, jerked out a ten-dollar bill and thrust it into the hand of the Mexican. It would pay him for any damage done to his poor house. Indeed it would almost have bought the place and all in it.

"Get out, all of you. Quick! Come on, Butch!"

He leaped to the front door, dragged it open. Butch behind him, he sprang into the street, both his guns crashing.

"Tex! Tex! This way!"

Clint had not been seen. The bandits had been watching the *cantina* and Tex's room, especially. Now they whirled and were caught between two bands of Americano devils who killed a man with every bullet. There came the shuffling thud of rawhide *huaraches* as they ran for shelter. One or two of them even dropped their rifles as they ran.

"Tex!"

Tex's long legs came flashing through the window. For an instant he hung from the window sill by his hands, and then he dropped. He stumbled and fell, but as he came up he had both guns in his hands again, and both were barking. And after him came Yavapai Slim.

"Hurry, Tex!"

Little need for the admonition! Tex was crossing the street in great strides. To make better speed, he was letting Clint and Butch do the shooting. Yavapai, not far behind, had not even redrawn his guns after his leap down.

The crackle of rifles was coming again, from doors and windows, from around corners. As yet, it was but desultory. The bandits had not yet all found safe places, nor had time to gather their wits.

Tex's foot slipped in a puddle of blood outside the door, and he sprawled, headfirst. Clint caught him and helped him back to his feet.

"This way!"

Clint plunged through the rear door, the other three after him. There was only one man out there, a sallow, long-mustached man on a fine buckskin horse. His mouth was half open. He had not expected any shooting back in this alley, with an adobe house between it and the *cantina*. But he already had his pearl-handled revolver drawn, and it was whipping up. Clint fired. A little black spot appeared on the horseman's forehead, and he sagged and slid limply to the ground.

"Pedro Duran! You got him!" gasped Tex.

"Let's go!" Clint yelled.

The four had run a block before they were discovered. They stopped at a corner and sent back a fusillade that halted the rush, and then they were running again. Tex spoke quickly, in his most persuasive tone:

"It's only me they want. You fellers hold 'em while I—"

Clint darted his eyes across to him, and they flicked Tex like a whip. "Come on, you yellow rat!"

His gun muzzle swung sidewise meaningly. The four ran on, paused at the last house to send back an-

other volley, and then sprinted wildly across the open toward a little clump of mesquite.

CLINT paused to glance back before he dived into the little grove. Consternation seemed to have stricken the men back there. Some of them were running after him, futilely firing their rifles as they ran, seemingly without aim. An occasional bullet struck fairly close, but he could not even guess where most of them went. And other men were running back toward the village. Nobody seemed to know what to do. Word was breaking out that their leader was dead.

Clint turned and ran into the mesquite grove. He saw a curious sight. Yavapai had already disappeared, and Butch was in his saddle, a grim look on his heavy face and his gun in his hand. Tex's big black lay stretched on the ground. A stray bullet had broken its spine.

And Tex? He stood holding Reddy's reins, and glaring at Butch. He would have left Clint, who had rescued him, there afoot at the mercy of the bandits. Out of the corner of his eye, Tex saw Clint come running. He turned and spoke with a frankness that made Clint almost believe him:

"I was just leading him out to you. Can we ride him double?"

"Got to," Clint said tersely. Climb on—no, you first!"

He did not intend to have Tex at his back. In a moment they were loping off. It was amazing how lightly Reddy could travel even with that double load. Tex spoke over his shoulder, spoke with almost a catch in his voice.

"Clint, I'll never forget this. But for you I'd have been dead by now."

"That's all right, Tex," Clint answered very softly. "I know you'd have done the same for me."

"I sure would!"

Butch, riding alongside, heard the words. He turned, his face suddenly purple. Clint gave him a little grin, but it was a grin not at all pleasant to see, and Butch choked off whatever he had intended to say.

"Here they come!"

There were only fifteen or so men following them. What the rest were doing in their confusion, they could not guess. During it all, Tex had been cool, his wits working fast.

"Sure badly mounted," he said. "But they can catch us riding double."

Badly mounted they were, on all sorts of nondescript, ill-fed horses. All but one. In the lead was the fine buckskin that had been Pedro Duran's, coming with the swift, smooth stride of a racer. On his back was a young man dressed in what looked like a shabby but gaudy version of Don Luis' splendor, or perhaps he was wearing Don Luis' cast-off clothes.

"It's Ramon Costello," grunted Butch.

Of course Clint knew the name. Costello was Pedro's second in command. Now he would be leader, if he could hold the bandits together. A young cutthroat, if ever there was one.

"Slow him, Tex, slow him!"

Tex had been taking the ridgeside a little too fast for the weight Reddy was carrying. Glancing ahead, Clint saw Yavapai waiting for them on top—and incidentally letting his horse get its wind, so that he could run away from them again if things looked too hot.

They leveled out to the summit, and Clint looked back again. Ramon was far in the lead now, but Clint could see that even the slowest

horse was more than holding his own with the three they pursued. In less than half an hour, they would have the double-burdened horse surrounded.

"Slow up!" Clint said suddenly. "I'm getting off!"

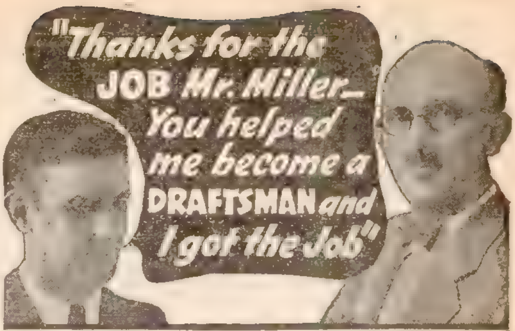
Never had Tex obeyed an order so joyfully or so promptly. Reddy slid his hoofs, and before he had stopped, Clint was on the ground, running back. He heard the quick rattle of hoofs as Tex put the sorrel down the slope at a dead run. Now, the weight halved, Reddy could strike his long stride, and not even that fast buckskin could catch him.

SQUARELY on top of the ridge, Clint threw himself behind a cactus. He doubled his legs up close, so that they could not be easily seen by anyone facing him. His gun was cocked in his hand.

He heard the thud of hoofs coming closer, the labored breathing of a horse approaching swiftly. Sooner than he had expected, a sombrero appeared over the curve of the ridge, and beneath it a pock-marked, evil face.

Ramon Costello had the predatory eyes of a Mexican eagle, and he was an old hand at such games as this. Before his shoulders were well in sight, he had seen Clint in spite of his concealment. He had probably picked that cactus instantly as the only possible hiding place.

They fired almost together. The



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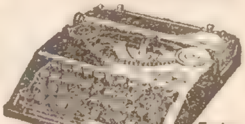

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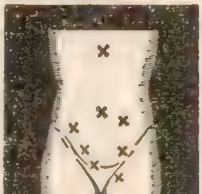

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Mexican threw up both hands, his revolver flying high in the air, and rolled backward out of the saddle. Sand spurted up in Clint's face.

The buckskin came plunging up, hardly knowing what had happened. Before he could collect himself enough to whirl off, Clint had leaped and seized the bridle. Now the horse whirled, almost pulling Clint from his feet. He snorted wildly, and his eyes protruded. Then, a twist, a boot shooting into the air, and Clint was in the saddle.

He turned the horse. From its back, he could see more heads and shoulders appearing up the slope. There were five cartridges left in the gun, and he fired them deliberately, aiming as well as he could from the rearing, plunging buckskin. All the heads disappeared. He hoped that he had hit three, but he was fairly sure at least of two.

No sound came from down there. All had stopped. Well, he wouldn't let them hear him running. If they thought he was still there, they would either pause to hold a council or swing far around to get behind him. In a trot, he went down the ridge, swerving quickly from side to side to keep to the softest ground. Only when he was almost to the bottom did he loosen his reins and strike a run.

On the next ridge, half a mile off, his three companions were sitting their horses waiting for him. He was within fifteen feet of them when he heard an exclamation from Yavapai:

"There they are!"

Clint looked around. A little group of horsemen had stopped on the summit of that first ridge, two hundred yards to one side of where Clint had been. Clint took off his wide hat and waved it tauntingly at them. They watched for a few moments, then wheeled their horses and went back the way they had come.

"Let's change horses," Clint said to Tex.

They slipped out of their saddles. Tex came forward with his hand out.

"Clint, I'll never forget this morning as long as I live!"

Apparently Clint did not notice the friendly gesture. He dropped the buckskin's reins into Tex's hand, without even touching it with his fingers. Then he turned toward Reddy.

"I know you won't, Tex," Clint said with a gravity even more solemn than Tex's. Mounting, he caught Butch's eye and saw a knowing twinkle there. His lips tightened in answer.

"Well, Tex, ready to go?" he said, mounting.

Tex nodded, smiled at him beningly, and turned off, beside Yavapai Slim. Clint and Butch dropped behind, side by side.

"THERE'S one man I don't understand!" Clint said, shaking his head. "From the things he tried to do, you'd think he was scared stiff back there. But he wasn't. He wasn't scared at all. I'm not sure he didn't enjoy it."

"Tex never gets scared," Butch said slowly. "He has nerve enough for six men. But I know him better than you do. The trouble is that, with him, nobody counts but Tex. He thinks it's only fair enough that you, or me, or any other man he has, should get killed to save him a little inconvenience—or to make him a hundred dollars. Clint, the butt of a cigar he's smokin' means more to him than the life of any one of us."

Again Clint shook his head. He was further than ever from understanding Tex. He could not comprehend how any man living could be so totally devoid of humanity, of the most rudimentary feeling of friendship or loyalty. Surely even a snake crawling the desert must have some sense of fellowship with his kind, some sort of vague, instinctive principle in his dealings.

No, Clint could never understand. His own mind belonged at the opposite pole. Tex Fletcher was a genius in his way, but something had been left out of his clever, crafty brain—the thing that makes a man human.

Butch looked at Clint hesitantly.

"Clint, do you remember what you called him back there?" he said slowly.

Clint flushed. "I . . . . I reckon I lost my temper."

"An' then you refused to shake hands with him. He knew that wasn't any misunderstandin'. Clint, you should have seen the look in his eye when you turned yore back to him. A mad dog couldn't have looked that way. Clint, he has you marked. If I was you, I wouldn't go back to the Silvermines."

"I'm going back," Clint said quietly.

Butch sighed. His heavy face looked troubled.

"I know it."

CHAPTER XII

THE BROWN-EYED WOMAN

WITH their early and rapid start, they crossed the line into Arizona in the early afternoon. Here, Clint knew where he was. He rode up to Tex.

"Tex, I think I'll turn off to Wacker if you don't mind. I want to write a letter, and mail it."

"A letter?" Tex looked at him suspiciously.

Clint had the thing planned. He looked slightly embarrassed.

"I . . . I haven't written to her in a long time," he stammered.

"I might have known!" Tex said,

laughing knowingly. "You young fellows! Sure, go ahead. Want us to wait for you somewhere?"

This time Clint's cofusion was genuine. He had not counted on this courtesy.

"Why, I thought I might maybe go to see her," he said quickly. "I have a nice little bunch of money in my pocket."

Tex did not seem to like this so well, but he could find no reasonable objection.

"Why, sure, Clint! But get back to Gulch City as soon as you can. I may need you. How long do you expect to be gone?"

"Oh, two, three days."

"That's fine! Well, good luck to you."

Clint turned off. It was out of his way, and hard on his horse, but he circled a little peak and climbed it from the back. Lying on the summit, he watched the three figures disappearing slowly toward the north. Not until they had become a faint, distant dot did he return to his horse and start down.

It was not far to the little town of Wacker. He reached it just before sunset. From far off, he saw that the place had a strange, unfamiliar look. When he came closer, he knew that it was because some of the few houses were missing.

Riding into the shabby street, he stared around in astonishment. A fire had swept the little town, but in some strange manner it had picked out scattered houses. Little curls of white smoke still came up from some of the ruins.

He had been hoping that nobody there would recognize him. If they did, he hardly expected that the few Americans living there would give him any trouble, and he knew that the Mexicans would not. Those he met on the street appeared not even to notice him as he rode by. Their faces looked stupid, blank, as though stricken by calamity.

Astonished, Clint looked at the broken windows He rode to the little adobe building that housed the only store in the place. According to a crudely painted sign, the post office was also lodged in it. He tied Reddy's reins to the hitching rack and went in.

There was a young woman behind the counter. She had a dazed, apathetic look, and her face was white and drawn, even to the lips. She looked at him dully, without speaking. He could sense terrible disaster in her brown eyes.

"Ma'am, I'd like to buy some paper and an envelope and a stamp."

Mechanically, she opened a box and gave them to him. He laid a five-dollar bill on the counter. She took it, put it into the cash drawer and closed the drawer. She turned away, then paused as though thinking. Slowly, she went back again, opened the drawer, counted out his change and laid it on the counter. All without a word.

CLINT looked at her curiously. There was a small table back in a corner, and a shaky chair near it. Clint went back and sat down at the table. He took the stub of pencil from his chaps pocket, and wrote carefully in Spanish:

My good friend Señor Enrique Judson:

Once you did a very great favor to a man who is my brother, although you know him by another name than that which I now use. It is for that thing that I cannot keep my part of the money paid for those horses stolen from you. I send it to you now, and I beg that you will find it in your heart to think kindly of one who is nothing but a horse thief and a stealer of cattle, as he thinks kindly of you.

Your friend,

Fulano de Tal.

He inspected the letter carefully, noticed a mistake in spelling and rewrote it. As in the note he had written before, the thin, sweeping lines looked purely Spanish.

He glanced over his shoulder. The young woman was standing behind the counter, staring blindly out through the broken window. Clint noticed that the glass still lay on the floor underneath. She was an unusually tall woman, with a fine, lithe figure. But there was something in the droop of her square shoulders that seemed to suggest the depth of hopelessness.

Quietly, Clint slipped some bills from his pocket. There were few of them, but they were of very large denomination. Fifteen hundred dollars. He flattened the bills carefully, folded them in the letter, and placed them in the envelope. He licked the envelope, and pressed it flat with his hand.

Old Henry Judson would be surprised when he got that letter. And wouldn't he wonder who that Mexican was for whom he had done that supposed favor? But Clint well knew that old Henry, gruff though he usually appeared, seemed to have spent most of his long life doing good turns for those who were in trouble. He himself was an example. Old Henry had taken him up, a poor orphan boy, and striven grimly to impart his own high principles to him. But for Henry Judson, Clint

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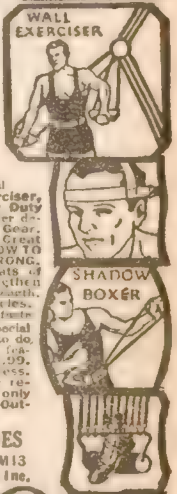

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would have been a different kind of man. Yes, there would be more than one Mexican ready to lay down his life for Henry Judson.

Clint stood up, the letter in his hand. He was about to ask the woman where the letter-drop was, when something about her back kept him from speaking. He went to the corner that was fenced off as a post office. He found a little slit sawed in the counter under the window, and dropped the letter in. He turned politely, and raised his hat.

"Thanks, ma'am," he said quietly.

Her eyes came slowly toward him, but she did not speak. Clint was already in the doorway. His plan, the sensible thing, had been to spend as little time as possible in the town, to be unobtrusive, to speak only when he had to. But suddenly he went striding to her across the floor. He could not help it.

"What is it, ma'am? Tell me?" he said quickly, gently.

Her hands raised almost to her face, fell weakly, limply back to her sides. She began to cry.

"What happened, ma'am? Tell me!"

Clint put a hand gently on her shoulder. There was a lump in his throat, choking him. Never had he seen such blind, silent grief. Now she raised her face, and the sympathy in his eyes seemed to bring some spark of life to hers.

"They came . . . last night." She spoke slowly, as though numb. "They burned the town. They killed . . . they killed my husband."

"Good God! Who?"

"Pedro Duran, Ramon Costello—all of them. They robbed . . . they killed . . . I don't know how many."

There was a moment of silence. They stood facing each other. Clint's arms, too, were limp at his sides. His hand had fallen from her shoulder. He could not believe it, at first.

And then he spoke softly, as though praying:

"Thank God!"

Again her eyes turned to him slowly. There was a dull question in them.

"Ma'm, I killed both of them this morning—Pedro and Ramon. If I'd known, I might not have shot them through the head, made it so easy for them."

Her great brown eyes were fixed on his face, and for the first time some of the dullness went out of them.

"You . . . are Clint Yancey?" she said hesitantly.

"Yes, ma'am."

"The outlaw?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She turned slowly, mechanically. Clint saw that she was almost as tall as he himself.

"Come to the kitchen. I'll get you supper."

SHE walked like an automaton. Clint followed her, not so much because he wanted food as because he hoped he could do something to help her.

She picked up the stove-lid lifter fumblingly, and stood as though not knowing what should be done next.

"Have you eaten anything all day?" Clint said gently.

"No—I wasn't hungry."

He took the lifter from her limp hand.

"Here, you go sit down. I'll get us something to eat. I'll make you some coffee."

He led her into the little store again, and made her sit in the old rocking chair. No one would ever have thought that big, grim-faced Clint Yancey could be so gentle. The kindness in his touch seemed to break her despair. She reached up quickly and barely touched his hand, and then her hand fell to her lap. But Clint noticed two tears creeping slowly down her cheeks, saw her eyelids tremble. Again he lay a kindly hand on her shoulder.

"There, go ahead, cry. It's the best thing you can do."

Her firm shoulder trembled under his hand, and her head sank slowly. Clint tiptoed quietly back to the kitchen. A cry, hot coffee, food—nothing could help much, but these were the things that could help a little. Poor young woman!

It was beginning to grow dark. Clint lighted the coal-oil lamp and set it on a shelf. He built a fire quickly, and while the stove was getting warm he looked around.

He found everything he needed, except bread, and that he did not trouble to hunt for much. Like all cowboys, he had little liking for bakers' bread. He rolled up his shirt sleeves, scrubbed his hands, and set about making a pan of biscuits. He had put water on for coffee when he made the fire.

He shook his head thoughtfully. So that was why Felipe had been so long getting the bandits to Cinco Santos. They had been up here on this raid. They had murdered this woman's husband and others. He was glad he had killed both the leaders. He wished that he had it to do over, that he could be back there again—he would have left many more of them lying in the dust. They were a foul blot on the face of the earth, on the face of Mexico. This was not the first wife they had made a widow.

Clint opened the stove and pushed in fresh wood. His thoughts shifted. Don Luis! Yes, Don Luis had sent Felipe for those bandits, perhaps had even dared to send orders to them. It was hard to guess what his connection with them was, but a con-

nection of some sort there was.

Why had he done it? Not to get back the money he had paid. The main purpose had seemed to be to kill Tex Fletcher, and that would end the profitable business between them. No, it was something personal. Clint had reasoned all this out before, and always he came to the same conclusion. Tex had practiced some of his treachery on Don Luis, not thinking it would become known. And the handsome, languid young Mexican was a man who would never forget.

CLINT nodded his head. Tex had a mortal enemy in Don Luis Cabeza de Vaca. And any man who was such a mortal enemy to Tex should prove useful to him. That was why he had left Tex and the others. He was going back to see Don Luis, to talk to him.

If he was to split Tex's gang, to take part of the men, he must lead them in rustling cattle. To drive rustled stock blindly across the border would be foolish. He would need to have arrangements made down there. Again, Don Luis.

He would leave here as soon as he had eaten, ride by night only, and would steal up on the *rancheria* in darkness. He would be safe. Curiosity would make the don willing to hear what he had to say, and once he had told his motives he would be doubly safe. The long arm of Don Luis would protect him while he was in Sonora.

He pulled the biscuits out and glanced at them approvingly. They were a light, golden brown. He put the pan back in the oven and quickly set the table. He had a cowboy's speed in cooking, and during the short time he had been in the kitchen he had prepared a surprisingly appetizing meal. Surely, he hoped, she would eat some of it!

He went softly into the store. There were large windows there, and so there was much more light than in the kitchen, almost as much as in the twilight outside. He could see her face quite plainly. She was still sitting in the same chair, but she had stopped crying now. She was looking blankly toward the open door, her face sad, but with some of the awful horror gone.

In her preoccupation, she had not heard him come in. He stood looking at her. She was much younger than he had first taken her to be, probably younger than he. Her wild, silent grief had made her look middle-aged. Suddenly, with a shock, Clint realized another thing. Althought she had no traces of prettiness, she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her tall, willowy figure was splendidly proportioned, and those great, melancholy brown eyes had a somber beauty that was breath-taking. Clint pulled himself together as he realized he had been staring at her.

"Ma'am, supper is ready," he said quietly.

She stood up immediately. It struck him that another woman of her size would have seemed awkward, while she was graceful, statuesque.

"Thank you, Clint."

She said it simply, without trying to smile. She would not be the kind to smile much at any time. Her face was of too serious and thoughtful a type. That, to Clint, was in her favor; he himself was slow to smile, slower to laugh.

He turned back to the kitchen. Suddenly he stopped. From somewhere down the road came the rapid drumming of many hoofs. He started for the door and his horse, but stopped again. It would be better

to let them pass.

Closer came the riders. The first swept into view, and Clint started wildly, his eyes sweeping the room as though seeking an escape. Captain Donley of the Arizona Rangers! All of them! Why had he not thought. Any fool should have known that they would come dashing here to investigate that bloody raid!

Clint's heart was pounding until it seemed to choke him. He held his breath. He had one arm half raised to salute and did not know it.

All of them—the whole ranger force tearing by on panting, sweating horses, their hard faces ahead. At last came Sergeant Wilson at the end of the line. And suddenly Wilson turned his face, slid his horse on its haunches.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Here's Clint Yancey's sorrel!"

Amid shouted cries the rest of the horses slid on their heels, and were whirled back. Guns jerked out of the holsters.

"Surround the house!" Captain Donley commanded. "We've got him at last!"

Mutely, with white face, Clint stood there. He made no move to draw his guns. It was too late to run. Already, they had the house completely surrounded.

And beside him stood that tall, beautiful woman, fresh horror in her great brown eyes, and her face suddenly pallid. The night before, she had stood mutely over the riddled, bleeding body of her husband. Tonight, it would be the body of this stranger who had come like an angel of mercy in her grief. A faint little groan of anguish shook her as she stood there.

Has the rangers' vengeance caught up with Clint at last? Does death wait for him in the house of the woman he has befriended? The next installment of ARIZONA RANGER brings more thrilling developments in this story of a brave man's fight for vindication. Don't miss it!

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A Cowboy Re-discovers The Sea Otter

By CHARLES L. McNICHOLS

ABOUT 1780, a gang of Russian fur traders with their Aleutian hunters came down the Pacific Coast from Alaska in search of one of the most valuable of all fur-bearing animals, the sea otter. They found the waters of California alive with them and proceeded to take all they could. In the next thirty years or so they not only killed off the easily available sea otters, but they exterminated the Indians on the islands off the California coast.

After the Spaniards succeeded in getting rid of the Russians, the few surviving sea otters made a valiant effort to repopulate the kelp beds off California's rocky shores. They were wary and man-shy, and they inhabited that section of the coast where steep cliffs and dangerous tides made approach almost impossible. The native California *rancheros* didn't trouble to hunt them, but the fact that their hides were each worth fifteen hundred dollars sealed their fate when the Americans occupied the territory.

The American hunters went after the sea otter with long, super-accurate rifles, using paper patch bullets and frequently telescope sights. The sad part of it was that these marksmen killed three or four sea otters for every one they recovered from the water, and they kept at it even after a government ban was placed on such slaughter, until the sea otter was wiped out about thirty years ago.

Or so everybody thought.

But a year ago a cowboy riding along the sea cliff above the great San Simeon cattle ranch reported that he saw some very small seals down in the kelp and thought they might be sea otters. Everybody laughed, but a government survey boat ran into the herd a little later and counted ninety of them!

Experts say these sea otters are the descendants of a pair or two that managed to escape the slaughter by hiding away in some of the numerous ocean caves. Needless to say, the sea otters are now being given every protection, and are continually under the eye of both guards and groups of scientists who are studying their habits.

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THIS MAN ACTED:

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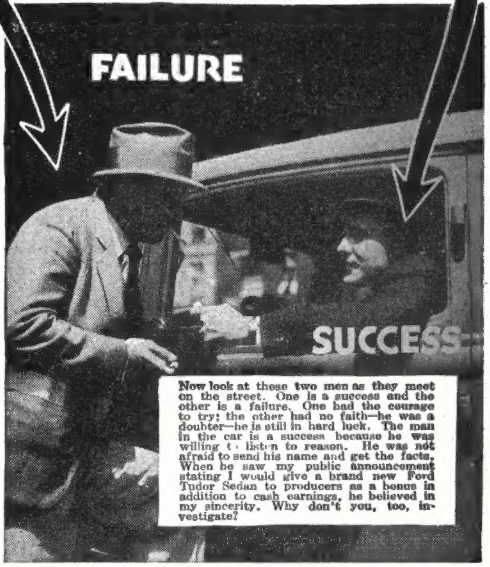
A FEW WEEKS LATER



Now look at these two men as they meet on the street. One is a success and the other is a failure. One had the courage to try; the other had no faith—he was a doubter—he is still in hard luck. The man in the car is a success because he was willing to listen to reason. He was not afraid to send his name and get the facts. When he saw my public announcement stating I would give a brand new Ford Tudor Sedan to producers as a bonus in addition to cash earnings, he believed in my sincerity. Why don't you, too, investigate?

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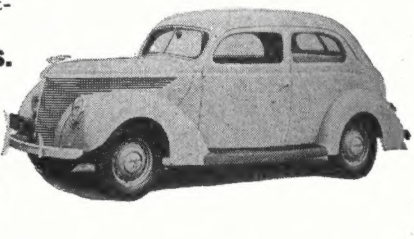

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